

Food allergies in babies

Food allergies

As you introduce solids, you'll no doubt notice which foods your baby likes and dislikes. However, it's also important to look for any signs of allergy or intolerance. It's advisable to introduce potentially problematic foods gradually so that you can monitor your baby's reaction to them.

When you first start the weaning process, it's best to begin with foods that are unlikely to be allergenic, such as rice, apple, pear, and quinoa. Then you can try introducing more allergenic foods around 6 months, ideally in conjunction with breastfeeding. Allergies are more common in babies than adults, but they still only affect 7-8% of children during early childhood and many allergies, such as a cows' milk allergy, will disappear as the infant grows older.

Identifying a food allergy

An allergy is different to an intolerance; while an allergy involves an over-reaction of the immune system, an intolerance – to lactose, for example - occurs when the body is physically unable to digest lactose. The most common symptoms of a food allergy are:

- Swelling of eyes and lips
- Diarrhoea, vomiting and sometimes constipation
- Wheezing, a runny nose, red eyes and sneezing
- Itching, hives and eczema

Severe wheezing and difficulty in breathing can be signs of anaphylaxis, which requires immediate medical assistance, but fortunately this kind of serious allergic reaction is rare. For more information on anaphylaxis, visit www.anaphylaxis.org.uk.

Foods that cause allergies

Some foods are more likely to cause an allergic reaction than others.

- Wheat based foods and other foods containing gluten
- Milk
- Eggs
- Fish and shellfish
- Peanuts
- Nuts
- Seeds

Foods allergies

If you're concerned that your baby might develop a food allergy, it's a good idea to introduce the foods listed above one at a time, and to start with just a small amount – although none of these food should be introduced in any amount before the age of six months.

Peanut allergy

If your baby has already been diagnosed with an allergy, such as a food allergy or eczema, or if

there is a history of allergy in their immediate family (if parents, brothers or sisters have an allergy such as a food allergy, asthma, eczema, hayfever, or other types of allergy) then your baby has a higher risk of developing peanut allergy. Talk to your GP, health visitor or medical allergy specialist before you give peanuts, or foods containing peanuts, to your baby for the first time.

If your baby hasn't been diagnosed with any allergies and there isn't a history of allergy in their immediate family, you can choose to give them peanuts or foods containing peanuts after they are six months old. But remember to crush them up – you should never give whole peanuts or nuts to children under five as they pose a risk of choking.

Pay special attention when you give your baby peanuts for the first time, and look out for any allergic reaction. If you think your child is having an allergic reaction, seek urgent medical advice.

If your baby exhibits an allergic reaction

If your baby reacts to any food they've been given, take them to your doctor who will be able to diagnose the problem and advise you on how to manage the allergy or intolerance. If your baby is diagnosed with an allergy or intolerance it can take time to become familiar with the foods they can and can't eat; until then, always read the label – food labelling laws are there to help you identify foods that contain potential allergens.

The role of breastmilk in the prevention of allergy

Experts agree that the nutrients found in breastmilk help to protect infants against developing allergies, by naturally supporting their immune system – nutrients such as prebiotic oligosaccharides, nucleotides and other functional components. So, breastfeeding or feeding expressed breastmilk from a bottle for at least the first 6 months of your baby's life may help prevent them from developing allergies.

If you are at all concerned about your baby's health, consult your midwife or health visitor. Or if you have any questions, you can always call our team of experts on **08457 623 628** between 8am and 8pm, Monday to Friday, or chat with them instantly, online, via Live Chat.