What does weaning mean?
It means getting baby used to foods other than milk - not stopping breast milk or formula feeds. Babies enjoy playing with foods of different colours and textures, as well as experimenting with new tastes, so pale coloured purees aren’t nearly so interesting!

What about baby-led weaning?
Baby-led weaning is letting your baby decide what to eat - for example when joining the family at mealtimes. The theory is that if you offer your baby some of the food you are eating - cut in shapes they can pick up, hold, and put to their mouth - they will soon eat the same foods as you.

No need to start with purees or cereals: just give them normal food (with no added salt or sugar) in bite-size pieces.

When should I start weaning my baby?
Research shows that a baby only needs breast milk (or formula) until 6 months of age. If you think your baby is not satisfied with milk alone before this time, remember that there are more calories in milk than in the first solid foods they can eat. So it would be better to give more milk, or increase the number of feeds, rather than introduce solids too soon.

Milk feeds will provide at least half your baby’s needs from 6 to 12 months. From 1 to 2 years old, your baby will get a third of their nutritional requirements from breast milk (or formula) alone. So babies don't need to get 3 meals a day soon after starting solid foods. Weaning is very gradual and takes many months.

How will I know if my baby is ready?
You can start baby-led weaning when your baby is about 6 months and:

- can sit upright
- starts to pick up pieces of food and take them to his mouth - this shows their immune and digestive systems are mature enough to cope with foods other than milk
- it’s quite normal for baby to spit out some foods!

Remember to keep your baby safe when they are eating solids:

- make sure baby is sitting upright on an adult’s lap or secured in a highchair
- don’t give baby nuts or fruit that contain stones - for example cherries or olives
- with baby-led weaning, no-one other than the baby should put food into his mouth - this is to avoid force feeding
- don’t leave baby on their own when they’re handling food.
My baby is ready. What should I do?

- Weaning can get very messy in the early days! Place the high chair on a plastic sheet, and make sure baby is wearing a short sleeve top.

- Increase the amount of solid foods you give baby gradually - for example, feed them 25% solids (and 75% milk feeds) at 12 months, half and half at 18 months, and 80% solids at 24 months.

- Continue to breastfeed (or formula feed) after solid foods. Baby will gradually demand less milk feeds.

- Morning and evening milk feeds are the most important. There might still be days when baby only wants breast milk (or formula milk).

- When baby is ill, breast milk is especially important as it provides for all their needs, and it contains vital antibodies to help baby recover more quickly. It’s okay for baby to stop eating solid foods for a few days.

- Be guided by your baby and you can’t go far wrong. If you have any questions, just ask your midwife, health visitor or dietitian - they will be happy to help.

But won't my baby gag if they feed themselves?

- Babies are not more likely to gag (or choke) if they feed themselves than if someone else is giving them solid foods. Gagging is a natural safety mechanism.

- In fact, they are more likely to gag if someone else is feeding them and they can’t control what goes into their mouth. With baby-led weaning baby is in control.

What about spoon feeding?

There is no evidence that spoon feeding is the best way to introduce solids to babies. It’s just what people used to do when everyone believed that babies needed more than breast milk (or formula) from the age of 3 or 4 months. At that age babies can’t take food to their mouths themselves.

- Food is only one aspect of the feeding process. Comfort, security, closeness, bonding, sociability and self-confidence all develop through appropriate feeding practices. After all, eating is a highly social experience that should always be shared. It is possible to prevent children becoming ‘faddy eaters’ by encouraging good eating habits from the start and involving the whole family. Mealtimes don’t need to turn into a battleground!

What about bottles and cups?

From 6 months baby can start to drink from a cup. After their first birthday, babies shouldn’t use teats or bottles.

What about vitamin supplements?

Your baby may need vitamins once you start to give them solid foods. For more information ask your health visitor or visit the NHS Healthy Start website: www.healthystart.nhs.uk

More about weaning...

NHS Healthy Start website: www.healthystart.nhs.uk

Baby-led weaning website: www.baby-led.com