

Baby Led Weaning: Infant Feeding Series

What is Baby Led Weaning?

Baby Led Weaning is a method of starting complementary foods in which the baby self-feeds from the start. Instead of offering pureed foods from a spoon, soft pieces of food -- either cut into long stick-like shapes, or diced into small pea sized pieces -- are offered. The food is placed in front of the baby and it's up to the baby to figure out how to get the food to the mouth, chew and swallow it. No spoon feeding, no purees, just baby exploring food placed in front of him.

A look at research and popular press views:

Baby Led Weaning was introduced by researchers from England in 2008. A comprehensive research [review paper on Baby Led Weaning](#) reveals both advantages and disadvantages to this method of starting solid foods. The conclusion from this paper and by other reviewers, is that there is not enough evidence to recommend this method of starting solid foods.

A visit to the [babyledweaning.com website](http://babyledweaning.com), will introduce you to what “tech savvy” moms are reading and hearing about baby led weaning, and why it has become a popular trend in baby feeding.

WIC's Role:

If a parent plans to utilize Baby Led Weaning methods, WIC's role is to help provide guidance to the parent by affirming many of the positive aspects of this feeding method, while making parents aware of some of the risks of Baby Led Weaning, and offering ways in which these risks can be minimized.

A Look at the Positives

- **DEVELOPMENTAL READINESS IS EMPHASIZED.** Baby Led Weaning focuses on introducing solids when the infant is interested and developmentally ready to self-feed, around 6 months of age. It stresses waiting until the baby is 6 months old, and has the developmental readiness to self-feed. (this can also be a concern—see next section)
- **FEEDING IS BABY DRIVEN.** Since the baby is self-feeding and putting the food into his own mouth, he is completely in control of how much he eats. This is in contrast to spoon feeding, where the parent sets the feeding pace, and may continue to feed after the child has indicated fullness cues. Establishing the role of “how much” as the child's role, early on, may be beneficial.
- **TRANSITION OF TEXTURE OCCURS QUICKLY.** Since baby is starting with soft pieces of food, it avoids the pitfall of introducing texture too late, resulting in baby rejecting foods with texture. The gag reflex moves from the front of the tongue to the back during the first year. Proponents of Baby Led Weaning state that offering soft foods when the gag reflex is towards the front of the tongue helps protect against choking.

- **SAME FOOD FOR EVERYONE/FAMILY MEALS.** Baby Led Weaning encourages parents to feed babies the same food as everyone else at the table. This establishes early on, that there is not a need to fix “kid foods” and “adult foods”. Since everyone is eating the same foods, you are more likely to feed the baby at the same time that everyone else is eating, versus spoon feeding the baby before or after a family meal.

A Look at Concerns

- **IMPORTANT NUTRIENTS MAY BE MISSED.** This is probably the biggest concern in following Baby Led Weaning techniques. The most important reason to start complementary foods is to provide an additional source of iron and zinc in the diet. Typical first foods that are offered with Baby Led Weaning are soft fruits and vegetable such as avocado, banana, and cooked sweet potato. Although these are healthy foods, they are not significant sources of iron or zinc.

WAYS TO MINIMIZE RISK:

- Encourage parents to consider offering infant cereal and pureed meat in a spoon along with allowing the baby to self-feed from soft foods when first starting baby led weaning.
- Discuss options for iron rich, soft finger foods that can be offered. Good suggestions include dry beans such as pinto beans, offered with a vitamin C rich fruit or vegetable, diced eggs, ground hamburger, or very tender and moist roast beef shreds. Stress that iron rich foods need to be offered daily.

- **DELAYING INTRODUCTION OF SOLIDS AND/OR NOT EATING ENOUGH SOLIDS.** At 6 months, babies have not developed their pincher grasp that allows them to pick up foods with their fingers. If food is offered in small pieces, the baby without a pincher grasp can only palm the food, and may not be successful with getting it to the mouth. This will vary widely from baby to baby. The amount of solids actually consumed may be minimal, essentially delaying the start of solid foods until closer to 8 or 9 months, putting the baby at risk for iron deficiency.

WAYS TO MINIMIZE RISK:

- Encourage parents to offer some assistance to their baby in getting the food to the mouth until they are developmentally able to do it all by themselves. This could be by spoon-feeding, or helping place the soft food into baby’s mouth if they are unable to transfer food from the palm of the hand to the mouth.
- Encourage parents to offer infant cereal and pureed meats by spoon until baby is able to navigate these foods themselves.

- **LEAVING BABY ALONE WITH FOOD.** Because the parent is not actively feeding the baby with a spoon, parents can place food in front of the baby and walk away. This could be a lost opportunity for parent-child interaction and development. It also increases the risk of choking if there is not constant supervision.

WAYS TO MINIMIZE RISK:

- Stress the importance of sitting with baby and interacting during the entire baby-led feeding time.
- **CHOKING HAZARDS.** Appropriate food must be offered to avoid choking. Food must be cut into pea sized pieces and must be soft enough to be easily smashed to avoid choking. As baby’s feeding skills progress, soft foods can be cut into thin stick-like pieces to be held in the hand. Harder textured foods should not be offered until feeding and swallowing skills are well advanced, usually around 9 months.
WAYS TO MINIMIZE RISK:
 - Discuss with parent appropriate size and texture of foods to offer to baby for self-feeding, providing examples of appropriate and inappropriate foods, textures and sizes.
- **TOO MUCH SALT, SUGAR AND FAT.** Baby Led Weaning stresses the convenience of offering table foods that everyone in the family is eating. Although this can be an advantage (see earlier discussion), it may also be a disadvantage. Research has shown that when babies transition from jarred baby foods to table foods, their vegetable intake decreases and the fat, sodium and sugar intake increases.

WAYS TO MINIMIZE RISK:

- Encourage parents to only offer foods without added salt, sugar and fat. Suggest taking out baby’s portion before food is seasoned for the rest of the family. Encourage parents to fix vegetables for everyone including baby.

Participant Centered Discussions are Important

Participant centered skills can be utilized to have discussions with parents about the pros and cons of Baby Led Weaning. Affirming the advantages of Baby Led Weaning with a mom who has decided this is how she wants to start solid foods, will honor the mom as the expert on her baby.

Asking permission to discuss and explain some of the concerns, and how to avoid them is just as important. By doing this, you will be able to offer anticipatory guidance that aligns with WIC recommendations for starting solid foods within the context of Baby Led Weaning. If Baby Led Weaning is simply dismissed as a “bad idea”, an opportunity to provide valuable guidance will be missed, and the participant may walk away thinking “That WIC person doesn’t know anything” and WIC loses credibility as a source of helpful, up-to-date information.

See the next page for a sample scenario.

Putting it into Practice.

This scenerio demonstates a conversation about Baby-Led Weaning.

Shaunna and her 6 month old baby Anthony are at WIC for their additonal education appointment. Anthony is growing well, is starting to get up on all fours, but is not yet crawling. He is very interested in everything around him. Mom is breastfeeding.

CPA: Hi Shaunna, thanks for coming in today, and I'm so glad you brought Anthony with you. Look at him smile and look at everything around him as he sits on your lap! Tell me a little bit about some of the new things he is doing these days.

Shaunna: Well, just this week he started to pull himself up on all fours. I think he really wants to crawl so he can get into his big brother's toys.

CPA: I bet they both have fun with each other, especially since Tyler doesn't have school this summer so you are all home together.

Shaunna: Yes, they both keep me really busy.

CPA: How about Anthony's eating? What is he doing new in this area?

Shaunna: Well, he's still breastfeeding. Thankfully he only wants to breastfeed once during the night now, so that's nice, but he breastfeeds A LOT during the day.

CPA: What about solid foods, such as jarred baby foods or infant cereal? Has he started eating any of these things?

Shaunna: Oh no. I don't plan to give him any of those things. I'm doing baby-led weaning and in fact I'm going to use my WIC vouchers to buy some avocados at the grocery store today because that's supposed to be a good first food for baby-led weaning. I will probably see how he likes them tonight.

CPA: Tell me a little more about what you know about baby-led weaning and what your plans are for starting Anthony on food.

Shaunna: Well I mostly have learned about it through my mommy and me group. It seems to be what everyone is doing. It's the new way to start solid foods. I guess you just put soft fruits and vegetable pieces in front of your baby and then you let them pick them up and put them in their mouth themselves. It's supposed to help your baby be in charge of their own food. I won't have to sit there and spoon the food in his mouth.

CPA: Yes, baby-led weaning does help your baby be in charge of how much and how fast he wants to eat. Would it be alright if I shared a little bit of information about why babies need to start on foods around 6 months?

Shaunna: Well for one thing, I know he must be growing right now and needs more to eat because, like I said, he's breastfeeding all the time!

CPA: You're right, your baby needs extra nutrition at this age that he can't get from breastmilk alone. We talked about signs that your baby will be ready to start solid foods last time we talked. What do you think—do you think Anthony is holding his head up well, is able to sit up, and is interested in food?

Shaunna: Oh yes! He's done those things for awhile now!

CPA: Great! When babies show signs they are ready for solid foods, its also about the time that their body is needing more iron and zinc -- nutrients that are very important for brain development. This is one of the most important reasons we start solid foods with babies.

Shaunna: Soooooo do avocados have iron and zinc?

CPA: That's a great question! No, avocados are nutritious and are a good source of a healthy fat, but they don't have iron or zinc. That's why WIC recommends that babies start out with infant cereal and infant meats as baby's first foods.

Shaunna: Ewww! My first baby would not touch that baby meat for anything.

CPA: Yes, sometimes if babies get used to other tastes and textures first, they may not like the meat. That's another reason why we encourage you to start with the meat, before other foods.

Shaunna: But wait, with baby-led weaning, I'm not supposed to use a spoon. That's forcing your baby to eat.

CPA: I understand your concern, you want your baby to be in control of his eating. How does Anthony let you know now, that he wants to nurse?

Shaunna: Well that's easy. He goes uh,uh,uh, and grabs at my shirt and almost tries to get na-na out himself!

CPA: Sounds like he's really good at letting you know what he wants. Well, he will do the same thing when you are helping him get the cereal and infant meat to his mouth using a spoon.

Watch him carefully, and he will open his mouth when he's ready for a bite, and when he is full he will turn his head away from the spoon and leave his mouth shut. As long as you follow his cues for when he's ready for another bite, and cues for when he's done, he will be in control.

Shaunna: Yea, but I really want to do baby-led weaning. It sounds like you are telling me that I shouldn't do it.

CPA: We want Anthony to lead the feeding, and that's what he's doing when you watch his cues. But we also want to make sure that Anthony gets foods that are high in iron and zinc. Would you be open to offering Anthony cereal and meat using the spoon at the beginning of the feeding, and then letting him feed himself soft pieces of food until he is full?

Once he practices and gets good at picking up food and putting it into his mouth, moving it around, smashing it in his gums, mixing it with his saliva and swallowing it, he will be able to eat other foods that are high in iron and zinc such as pinto beans, small pieces of egg, or really tender pieces of meat, such as a roast cooked all day in a crockpot. He needs food high in iron and zinc every day, whether its food he picks up and eats himself or food you offer with the spoon.

So what do you think? Are you ok with a little spoon feeding at first while Anthony gets good at the baby-led weaning thing? Just to make sure he's getting the important nutrition?

Shaunna: So it's really just a short time that I would be spoon feeding him—just until he can eat enough iron foods himself. I guess that makes sense because I want to make sure he has the nutrition he needs.

CPA: Yes, that's right! It would only be for a short time. What other things are you looking forward to with baby-led weaning?

Shaunna: Well, I like the fact that he will start out with whole fruits and vegetables rather than eat the mushy stuff. I think he will learn to like them better. I know my other son would eat vegetables out of the jar, but then didn't really like the texture of them when I started giving him vegetables off the table.

CPA: It sounds like it's really important to you that your son likes vegetables and fruits, and you think that baby led weaning will help him like them better than your first son.

Shaunna: That's what I hope anyway! And I want everyone to eat together as a family so I won't have to feed Anthony baby food before everyone else eats.

CPA: Eating together as a family is such a great thing! Just remember to take Anthony's food out before you add salt and sugar. At first you will want to dice his food into small pieces, about the size of a pea to avoid choking.

What other questions might you have about starting solid foods or what's coming up in the next few months?

Shaunna: Since I'm breastfeeding, what do I give Anthony to drink at meals?

CPA: Great question! It's a great time to start Anthony learning to drink from a cup. Just put water in the cup. An open cup is best, because this will help him learn how to clip his lips on the rim and take a drink. This helps him get used to the taste of water too, so he will drink it as he gets older. Don't worry if he doesn't drink very much. He's still breastfeeding often, so is getting plenty of liquids.

What else might you be wondering about?

Shaunna: I think that's about it. I'm excited to start Anthony on food. I will start with infant cereal and meats, but will also let him feed himself.

CPA: That sounds like a plan. I'm sure by the time I see you next time, he will be a pro at eating soft table foods and drinking from a cup! Hey—and the good news is that you will have infant cereal and infant meats on your food vouchers today! And also bananas which is an awesome first food too!

Shaunna: Great! I'm heading to the store right now.