

Ask the pediatrician: How often should babies eat?

June 6 2022, by Dr. Sanjeev Jain



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Q: How often should I feed my baby? And how do I know when she's hungry?

A: One of the most common questions [new parents](#) have is how often their baby should eat. This is especially true as parents struggle with the formula shortage and wonder if their [babies](#) are getting enough to eat.

The best answer is surprisingly simple: In general, babies should be fed whenever they seem hungry.

For babies born prematurely or with certain [medical conditions](#), scheduled feedings advised by your pediatrician are best. But for most healthy, full-term infants, parents can look to their baby rather than the clock for hunger cues. This is called feeding on demand, or responsive feeding.

A hungry baby often will cry. But it's best to watch for hunger cues before the baby starts crying, which is a late sign of hunger and can make it hard for them to settle down and eat.

Some other typical hunger cues in babies:

- Licking lips
- Sticking tongue out
- Rooting (moving jaw and mouth or head in search of breast)
- Putting their hand to mouth repeatedly
- Opening their mouth
- Fussiness
- Sucking on everything around them

It is important to realize, however, that your baby may cry or suck for other reasons. Babies suck not only for hunger, but also for comfort; it can be hard at first for parents to tell the difference. Sometimes, your baby just needs to be cuddled or changed.

Each baby is different—some like to snack more often, and others drink more at one time and go longer between feedings. However, most babies will drink more and go longer between feedings as they get bigger and their tummies can hold more milk.

Here is a general feeding guide:

- Most newborns eat every 2 to 3 hours, or 8 to 12 times every 24 hours. Babies might only take in half ounce per feeding for the first day or two of life, but after that will usually drink 1 to 2 ounces at each feeding. This amount increases to 2 to 3 ounces by 2 weeks of age.
- At about 2 months of age, babies usually take 4 to 5 ounces per feeding every 3 to 4 hours.
- At 4 months, babies usually take 4 to 6 ounces per feeding.
- At 6 months, babies may be taking up to 8 ounces every 4 to 5 hours.

Most babies will increase the amount of formula they drink by an average of 1 ounce each month before leveling off at about 7 to 8 ounces per feeding. Solid foods should be started at about 6 months old.

Babies are usually pretty good at eating the right amount, but they can sometimes take in more than they need. Infants who are bottle feeding may be more likely to overfeed, because drinking from a bottle may take less effort than breastfeeding.

Overfed babies can have stomach pains, gas, spit up or vomit and be at higher risk for obesity later in life. It's better to offer less, because you can always give more if your baby wants it. This also gives babies time to realize when they're full.

If you are concerned your baby wants to eat all the time—even when full—talk with your pediatrician. Pacifiers may be used after feeding to help sooth healthy-weight babies who like to suck for comfort, rather than nutrition. For babies who are breastfed, it's best to wait to offer pacifiers until around 3 to 4 weeks of age, when breastfeeding is well established.

Most babies will double their [birth weight](#) by 5 months of age and triple their birth weight by their first birthday. If your baby is having trouble gaining weight, don't wait too long between feeding, even if it means waking your baby.

A newborn's diaper is a good indicator of whether they are getting enough to eat. In the first few days after birth, a baby should have two or three wet diapers each day. After the first four or five days, a baby should have at least five or six wet diapers a day. Stool frequency is more variable and depends whether your baby is breastfed or formula-fed.

During regular health check-ups, your pediatrician will check your baby's weight and plot it on a growth chart. Your baby's progress on the growth chart is one way to tell whether your baby is getting enough food. Babies who stay in healthy growth percentile ranges are probably getting a healthy amount of food during feedings. If you have concerns or questions, check with your pediatrician.

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