

Children’s Speech and Language Therapy Team

Developmental Swallowing and Feeding in Children aged 0 to 3 years

The following is a guide on the typical development of your baby’s swallow. As your baby develops and grows, so do their skills in eating, drinking and swallowing. By knowing the typical stages of a baby’s swallowing development, you will be able to make informed decisions on your baby’s requirements.

The ability to eat, drink and swallow is a complex process involving sensory, motor and cognitive abilities (ASHA, 2025).

Should you have any questions regarding your baby’s eating, drinking and swallowing, do not hesitate to contact your Health Visitor or GP. Should you have any specialist services involved such as a paediatrician or a dietician, please speak to them.

Typical developmental milestones in the process of swallowing:

You may be aware of the milestones your baby is working through as they grow, particularly sitting up, first words and walking. Did you know your baby is also working on developing their ability to eat, drink and swallow safely?



(ASHA, 2025; CDC,

Weaning Your Baby

As a baby's eating, drinking and swallowing skills develop they typically show signs of readiness for weaning onto solid foods. Baby-led weaning is a way of weaning which puts your baby in charge of what they eat. Placing a small selection of easy to grasp, suck and chew foods helps introduce babies to solid foods in a way which allows them to explore them using their senses and direct how much of the food is in their mouth (NHS, n.d.).

From about 6 months, when your baby shows signs of readiness, you can start to introduce solid foods (NHS, n.d.). If your baby eats little at the beginning, it is okay since the main source of food is breast milk or formula (ASHA, 2025). It is important to remember that all children develop at their own pace and if you have any questions about your child's readiness for weaning, speak to a healthcare professional.

Signs of readiness to look for in your baby to ensure that they are able to eat solid foods safely are:

- Can hold their head up without support and hold it steady
- Can sit upright without support
- Can reach out and grasp objects, they can coordinate their eyes and hands.
- Can move food from the front of their mouth to the back and swallow it (NHS, n.d.).

They may also be showing an interest in your food and what you are eating, but if not, allowing them to see and handle foods through baby-led weaning should help them develop an interest. However, an interest in food alone isn't enough. Your baby should be showing the signs above to ensure they have the ability to eat and swallow safely.

Finger foods are good to start with such as:-

- cooked vegetables
- fruit
- pasta
- soft foods like banana or avocado
- dissolvable maize snacks, such as Quavers

Try to offer a range of textures to choose from and have fun with it.

Babies love picking food up and feeding themselves. It is also good for developing hand-eye coordination. (NHS, n.d.) There is no evidence to suggest babies are more likely to choke with baby-led weaning, compared to spoon-feeding.

Always stay with your baby while they are eating and monitor them.

All babies have a strong gag reflex, you may notice them gag when they begin to explore new textures and tastes. This is due to the new texture being unfamiliar and is part of learning to eat and swallow for most babies. **However, if you are anxious about choking and gagging, speak to your health visitor, GP or Speech and Language Therapist for advice.**

If There Are Feeding Difficulties:-

Health Professionals may use the term **Aspiration** when talking about children who have feeding / swallowing difficulties. **Aspiration** is when foods or liquids are drawn into the airway below the level of the vocal cords (voice box) rather than swallowed safely into the stomach. Some children may be at risk of aspiration including children with:-

- Brain injury
- Cerebral palsy/physical disability
- Heart and/or breathing problems
- Severe gastro oesophageal reflux
- Some syndromes
- Epilepsy
- Profound and multiple learning difficulty
- Children with developmental difficulties

These are some of the signs of aspiration to be aware of:-

- Recurrent chest infections
- Coughing before, during or after swallowing
- “Wet” breathing sounds after food / drink
- Gurgly voice after food/drinks
- Lots of swallows needed to clear one mouthful
- Sudden change in colour or sweating when eating/drinking
- Sudden distressed facial expression when eating/drinking, eg blinking.
- Watering of eyes (tears) during swallowing
- Sleepiness or yawning during or after feeding

We would usually expect to see two or more of these signs if they are aspirating.

If you are worried that a child may be aspirating, contact your GP or Health Visitor who can refer you through to a Speech and Language Therapist. If the referral is appropriate, your child will be seen for an assessment of their feeding skills by a Speech & Language Therapist (SALT) who specialises in helping children who are having difficulties with eating and/or drinking.

What will the SALT do?

The SALT will assess how your child controls the muscles used in eating and drinking and how your child swallows.

The SALT will usually visit you and your child at home or at school. They may want to look at your child’s mouth and need to see your child having a normal mealtime whether that is milk only or milk and solids.

Following the assessment, a plan will be made for feeding your child safely and shared with everyone who needs to be aware of this.

Further Information:

Further information on milestones and baby-led weaning can be found on the following NHS websites:

Your baby's first solid foods - NHS

www.nhs.uk/start-for-life/baby/

Sign up for updates on your baby's milestones, tailored to your baby's age, at Start for Life:

www.nhs.uk/start-for-life/start-for-life-emails/#:~:text=After%20your%20baby%20is%20born,looking%20after%20your%20mental%20wellbeing

Find out more about the CHFT Children's Speech and Language Therapy service at:

<https://www.cht.nhs.uk/childrens-therapy-services>

References:

ASHA. (2025). **What to expect: Your child's feeding development.** Asha.org.

<https://www.asha.org/about/press-room/articles/what-to-expect-your-childs-feeding-development/?srsltid=AfmBOoq7vB3YBSdmmtwAS-IPHa9O605op-i3u3zibKwG7ZH9rzq26zus>

ASHA. (2025). **Feeding and Swallowing milestones: Birth to One Year.** ASHA.

https://www.asha.org/public/developmental-milestones/feeding-and-swallowing-milestones-birth-to-1-year/?srsltid=AfmBOop7ljiYsz5Mq4xRDuP_I3PuAX3NBwfRKLzIMpzsMr9rt5kh8GEz

CDC. (2023). **CDC's Developmental Milestones.** Cdc.gov.

<https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/milestones/index.html>

NCT. (2022). **Baby-Led Weaning pros and cons.** NCT.

<https://www.nct.org.uk/information/baby-toddler/feeding-your-baby-or-toddler/baby-led-weaning-pros-and-cons#:~:text=Introducing%20your%20little%20one%20to,it%20around%20and%20swallow%20safely.>

NHS. (nd). **Weaning. Better Health Start For Life.**

<https://www.nhs.uk/start-for-life/baby/weaning/what-to-feed-your-baby/from-around-6-months/>

If you have any comments about this leaflet or the service you have received you can contact :

Children's Speech and Language Therapy Department
Halifax Admin Team Tel: 01422 261340
Huddersfield Admin Team Tel: 01484 344299

www.cht.nhs.uk

If you would like this information in another format or language contact the above.

Potřebujete-li tyto informace v jiném formátu nebo jazyce, obraťte se prosím na výše uvedené oddělení

Jeżeli są Państwo zainteresowani otrzymaniem tych informacji w innym formacie lub wersji językowej, prosimy skontaktować się z nami, korzystając z ww. danych kontaktowych

ਚ ਤੁਸੀਂ ਇਹ ਜਾਣਕਾਰੀ ਕਿਸੇ ਹੋਰ ਪ੍ਰਾਚੂਪ ਜਾਂ ਭਾਸ਼ਾ ਵਿੱਚ ਲੈਣਾ ਚਾਹੁੰਦੇ ਹੋ,
ਤਾਂ ਕਿਰਪਾ ਕਰਕੇ ਉਪਰੋਕਤ ਵਿਭਾਗ ਵਿੱਚ ਸਾਡੇ ਨਾਲ ਸੰਪਰਕ ਕਰੋ।

اگر آپ کو یہ معلومات کسی اور فارمیٹ یا زبان میں درکار ہوں، تو
برائے مہربانی مندرجہ بالا شعبے میں ہم سے رابطہ کریں۔

"إذا احتجت الحصول على هذه المعلومة بشكل مغاير أو مترجمة إلى لغة مختلفة فيرجى منك الاتصال بالقسم
المذكور أعلاه"