

Starting Spoon Feeds

For babies with a cleft involving the palate



When do I start offering spoon feeds?

Your baby is ready to start eating solid foods at the same time as babies without a cleft. If your baby is having difficulty with bottles or is requiring supplementary tube feeds please contact your Cleft Team/Speech & Language Therapist before offering spoon feeds.

Signs that your baby is ready for spoon feeding:

- Between 21 and 26 weeks of age (5-6 months) **and**
- Holds head up, sitting upright with little support
- Grasping at objects and putting hands in mouth
- Acting interested in food during family meal times
- Not fully satisfied with bottle feeds, demanding extra bottle feeds over a few days



Should I wait until the palate is fully repaired? NO - nutritional needs are not met by milk alone after 6 months of age. A key developmental stage for accepting different textures may be missed.

How do I start?

- Choose a time in the day when your baby is not too hungry and you have some free time so you don't have to rush. Offer a spoon feed before a bottle feed.
- Create a calm atmosphere by switching off mobile phones, devices etc.
- Sit your baby upright and safely strapped into a chair.
- Smile and talk to your baby, face-to-face, making eye contact during the feed.
- Start with 1 or 2 teaspoons once or twice a day, offered from a small baby spoon. Never put solid food into your baby's bottle.
- If your baby refuses the spoon or gets upset try again the next day.
- If your baby refuses a new food/taste this does not mean they will never like it. Babies may need a new food offered many times (10-20 times) before they like it.



General Tips for feeding a baby with a cleft

- ✓ Don't worry if food goes up through the cleft and comes down the nose. This is normal before the palate repair and is not harmful. Your baby may sneeze to clear their nose. If food appears to get 'stuck' in the cleft just offer a little water to drink which should clear and clean the cleft.
 - ✓ It's ok to get messy as children learn about food by playing with it, feeling it and smelling it.
 - ✓ Praise your baby for eating or playing with their food.
 - ✓ Leave all the cleaning until the end of the meal and do not wipe the mouth after each spoon.
 - ✓ Stop the feed if your baby closes their mouth, pulls away from the spoon or is gagging and/or coughing. Do not force the feed.
 - ✓ If your baby continues to refuse spoon feeds you can call your cleft team for support.
 - ✓ Feed your baby with the rest of the family at mealtimes.
 - ✓ From 6 months of age offer water from a cup/beaker. Avoid spill-proof cups as these require your baby to have suction (not possible with an unrepaired cleft palate). Learning to drink from a cup is messy. Most babies have learnt this new skill by 12-18 months of age with improved volumes taken after their palate repair. See our leaflet on [changing from bottles to cups](#).
- *Baby-led weaning: it is useful to have offered some spoon feeds before the palate repair as liquidized & soft textures are recommended following surgery.



Where can I get more information on spoon feeding?

- General information on www.hse.ie and www.bordbia.ie and www.mychild.ie
Search under 'weaning'
- Advice from your Public Health Nurse, GP, Cleft Team