

In the Kitchen with Baby

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By Cynthia Lair

As parents, we are given an opportunity to revisit what it means to nourish. Babies and young children wait expectantly for their parents to feed them. The choice of what goes into an infant's mouth is up to us, at least while our children are small. Most of us want to feed our children the best food possible, but often the line between nutrition education and advertising is thin.

Americans fork over \$1.25 billion every year buying commercially prepared baby food. Many parents take their cues about when to start their babies on solid foods from baby food manufacturers. If the cereal box says it's safe for four-month-old babies, parents assume this to be true. Of course it behooves the baby food companies to have parents start solids as early as possible. But does the baby benefit? Studies show that the early introduction of solids may be linked to an increase in childhood food allergies. 1

There are obvious physical signs of a baby's readiness for solid foods. These usually don't occur until about six months of age and include the ability to sit up unattended and the tendency to grab or reach for food. Some cultures use the appearance of teeth as a sign of readiness. Many parents aren't aware that during a baby's first year, he can get almost all of the nutrition he needs from breastmilk. The first few months of eating solids are therefore less to provide nutrients than to accustom a baby to new tastes and textures.

Have you checked out the taste and texture of commercial baby cereal? Pour some commercial rice cereal in a bowl. It has no smell. The taste is the very definition of bland. The cereal is made from refined rice that has been processed and precooked. Refined grains have nothing to offer but carbohydrates. Whole grains, on the other hand, contain not only carbohydrates but also protein, fat, fiber, vitamins, essential minerals, and life. The germ is still intact. If you put a whole grain in water, it sprouts. If you put commercial baby cereal in water, it makes paste. Why train your baby to want this? By pre-toasting organic whole grains, grinding them in a small electric grinder, and cooking the grains with water, you can create a fresh, delicious, nutrient-dense cereal with taste, texture, and aroma.

Commercial baby food is convenient, it's true. But the price for this convenience is high. Besides paying companies to blenderize food and put it in jars, you also pay them to dilute the food with water and sometimes to add starchy fillers such as tapioca, rice flour, and modified cornstarch. Even the companies producing organic baby food sometimes use fillers. Such additives lower production costs and help mask off-flavors.

In 1995, the Center for Science in the Public Interest did an evaluation of commercial baby food. Their published findings concluded: "To give your baby the most nutritious and economical food, prepare your own baby food whenever possible. Using a blender or food processor, it is easy to puree most foods." 2

Is Organic Necessary?

Many parents wonder about the importance of organic food for their infant, given that organic produce and grains sometimes can be more expensive than their nonorganic counterparts. The answer is that pesticides are a concern. Even traces of the chemicals can irritate the

immature digestive system of an infant. Congress unanimously passed a Food Quality Protection Act in 1996 that requires all pesticides to be safe for infants and children. Yet in a recent comprehensive study done by the Environmental Working Group, pesticide levels in the US food supply were found to be at unsafe levels for children aged six months to five years. According to the report, peaches, apples, pears, grapes, and commercial baby foods which use these fruits are the most common sources of unsafe levels of organophosphate pesticides. To protect your child, buy organic baby food; or better yet, make fresh food for your baby from a variety of organic grains, beans, fruits, and vegetables.

Getting Fresh

The bottom line is that the best way to ensure the quality of your baby's food is to make it yourself. Fresh food has the maximum in vitamins, minerals, and enzymes. Foods lose nutrients when processed. A little jar of army-green peas with a two-year shelf life simply can't compare to the smell, taste, color, and vitality offered by garden-fresh peas that have been steamed and mashed.

Some parents worry that they must always supplement their child's diet with prepared foods that contain iron, since there has been considerable publicity in recent years about iron deficiency in infants. Several factors can lead to such deficiencies. One is a mother who was anemic during pregnancy. Another is the common practice of cutting the cord too early, before pulsing has ceased. Apparently this can decrease the iron stores transferred from the mother. Choosing formula over breastmilk is also a factor. Babies absorb iron from breastmilk better than from iron-fortified formulas. If the mother's iron levels are sufficient, a child who is breastfed for a year will most likely maintain normal iron status. ⁴ But, perhaps playing to the fears of conscientious parents, baby food manufacturers typically fortify their infant cereals with electrolytic iron. Unfortunately, this is one of the least absorbable forms of artificial iron. It will, however, stick to the flakes of cereal instead of settling to the bottom of the box. Ferrous sulfate, a more absorbable form of iron, can affect the flavor and appearance of the cereal.

Artificial iron wouldn't be required at all if the companies used whole grain for their cereals, especially such nutrient-dense varieties as quinoa and millet, which have naturally occurring iron. If you are breastfeeding your baby, eating a well-balanced diet, and using whole-grain cereal for your baby, you should not have to worry about iron. If, however, you are concerned, consider making your own iron-fortified cereal: Simply toast the grains you use in a cast-iron skillet or add a sprinkle of kelp, an iron-rich sea vegetable.

Making It Yourself

For mothers and fathers who work full-time, either in the home or outside, making their babies' foods can seem an overwhelming task. But, in fact, it's easy. Babies are more adventurous eaters than many of us give them credit for; they'll usually love unusual flavors and textures if they're given the chance to try them. So do what our foremothers and their foremothers did. Take some of the fresh food you are eating yourself and puree it for your baby. You'll often be surprised to find that your one year old adores hummus, pasta, even broccoli.

To get started, invest in a good-quality blender or food processor and a small electric coffee grinder (separate from the one you use for coffee). Use the grinder to grind grains for whole-grain baby cereal. Use the blender or food processor to whirl some of the peas, carrots, sweet potatoes, baked apples, kidney beans, or brown rice that the rest of the family is eating. Food does not have to be pureed to the silky smoothness of commercial food. A little texture is okay. Stick with simple whole grains, fruits, and vegetables for babies six to 10 months of age.

Always introduce new foods one at a time and wait four to five days before introducing another new food.

The following recipes will help you to get started. Note that all of them are designed to provide nutritious, delicious, and easy-to-make meals for the entire family. You and your older children can enjoy them as much as baby does. Shared family meals are, after all, the foundation of strong, healthy families.

Cynthia Lair has been part of the nutrition faculty at Bastyr University, the nation's only fully accredited school of natural medicine, since 1994. She is the author of Feeding the Whole Family: Whole Foods Recipes for Babies, Young Children and Their Parents (Moon Smile Press, 1998).

Notes

1. L. Businco, G. Bruno, P. G. Giampietro, and M. Ferrara, "Is Prevention of Food Allergy Worthwhile?" *Journal of Investigative Allergies and Clinical Immunology*, 3, no. 5 (1993): 231–236.
2. Daryl D. Stallone, PhD, M.P.H. and Michael F. Jacobson, PhD "Cheating Babies: Nutritional Quality and Cost of Commercial Baby Food," *Center for Science in the Public Interest*, April 1995.
3. Richard Wiles, Kert Davies, and Christopher Campbell, "Overexposed: Organophosphate Insecticides in Children's Food," *Environmental Working Group/The Tides Center*, January 1998.
4. American Academy of Pediatrics, Committee on Nutrition, "The Use of Whole Cow's Milk in Infancy," 89, no. 6 (1992): 1105–1109.

Other Resources

For more information on baby food, see the following articles in past issues of *Mothering*: "Baby Food Is Whatever I Feed My Baby," no. 85; "First Food," no. 77; and "Satisfaction Guaranteed: Getting Started as a Vegetarian Family," no. 72.

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Sidebar: Whole Grain Baby Cereal

I don't like calling this "baby cereal" because this cereal is for everyone. Adults and older children can dress it up with bananas, date sugar, toasted nuts, sliced apples, milk, maple syrup, blueberries, or whatever. The grains were chosen because they are the least allergenic and the easiest to digest. Try to find organic varieties if possible.

Choose one:

- 1 cup short-grain brown rice
- 1 cup millet
- 1 cup quinoa
- 1 cup sweet brown rice
- Toast grain

Place grains in a fine strainer; rinse and drain.

Oven toasting: Preheat oven to 350 degrees F. Spread grains on a cookie sheet and toast in the oven until they give off a nutty aroma (12 to 15 minutes).

Skillet toasting: Place washed grains in a large skillet on burner and toast on medium heat, stirring constantly, until grains give off nutty aroma (about 5 to 8 minutes).

Let toasted grains cool, then store them in a sealed container.

Grind grain

For optimum nutrition, grind the grains in a small electric grinder or food processor just prior to using; once a grain is ground it begins to lose nutritional value within 24 to 48 hours. Store the whole toasted grains in labeled, sealed containers and grind the amount you need before cooking.

Cook ground grains into cereal

Baby-size portion of cereal: Mix together 2 to 3 tablespoons of ground cereal and 1/2 to 3/4 cups water and a pinch of sea salt in a small pot. Bring it to a boil. Reduce heat to low and simmer, covered, for five minutes.

Family-size portion of cereal: For four adult-size servings, use 1 cup ground grains, 3 to 4 cups water and 1 teaspoon salt. Combine cereal, water, and salt in a pot; stir with a whisk and bring to a boil. Reduce heat to low and simmer, covered, for 10 to 12 minutes. A flame-tamer or heat deflector used while simmering will help prevent scorching or sticking.

Preparation time: eight to 15 minutes for toasting; five to 12 minutes to cook cereal

Makes four adult-size portions of cereal

French Lentil & Potato Stew

This simple, hearty stew is my favorite standby for a one-dish meal, quick to prepare and economical. The tiny French lentils are wonderful, but if you can't find them, substitute regular brown lentils. Ghee, or clarified butter, can hold a higher temperature than butter without burning.

1–2 teaspoons ghee or olive oil
1 onion, chopped
1 teaspoon cumin
1 teaspoon coriander
1 teaspoon freshly grated gingerroot
¼ teaspoon cayenne
¼ teaspoon cinnamon
1 teaspoon turmeric
1/8 teaspoon black pepper
¼ teaspoon allspice
2 red potatoes, cut in cubes
1 parsnip, sliced
1 stalk celery, diced
1 carrot, chopped
1 cup French lentils
4 cups water
1 teaspoon sea salt
Garnish:

plain yogurt

Melt ghee or butter in a large soup pot on medium heat. Add onion and sauté until soft. Add all spices and sauté a few more minutes. Add potatoes, parsnip, celery, carrot, lentil, and water. Bring soup to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer, covered, for 50 to 60 minutes. If using a pressure cooker, bring up to pressure and cook 40 minutes. Stir in salt. Serve stew garnished with a dollop of yogurt.

Preparation time: 1 hour and 10 minutes

Makes six servings

For babies six to 10 months: Reserve an extra parsnip or potato. Slice vegetable and steam or bake while stew is cooking. Puree and serve. Or serve this stew to the rest of the family over basmati brown rice. Blend some of this rice with breastmilk or water to make cereal for your baby.

For babies 10 months and older: Remove some cooked stew before adding salt. Puree lightly and serve.

Quick Lemon & Garlic Quinoa Salad

Quinoa has an excellent nutritional profile (10.5 grams of protein per cup). This unique whole grain, which was the staple food of the Incas, is also rich in calcium and iron. It has been used in Africa and Peru to aid women in producing a good supply of breastmilk.

Salad:

1 cup dried quinoa

8 cups water

Pinch of sea salt

½ cup carrots, chopped

1/3 cup parsley, minced

¼ cup sunflower seeds

Dressing:

2–3 cloves garlic, minced

¼ cup freshly squeezed lemon juice

2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

2 tablespoons tamari or shoyu

Rinse quinoa with warm water and drain through a fine strainer. Place quinoa in a 3-quart pan and dry-roast on low heat (about five to eight minutes). Stir grains constantly until they begin to change color and give off a nutty aroma. Bring water to boil in a large pot. Add salt and toasted quinoa to boiling water. Boil for seven to eight minutes. Remove from heat and drain quinoa in a large strainer, in the same way you would prepare pasta.

Prepare vegetables and dressing. Place cooked quinoa in a large bowl. Add carrots, seeds, and parsley to quinoa. Mix thoroughly. Combine garlic, lemon juice, oil, and tamari or shoyu; pour over quinoa and toss well. Serve at room temperature or chilled.

Preparation time: 15 to 20 minutes

Makes four to six servings

For babies six to 10 months: Reserve some plain cooked quinoa. Puree quinoa with water or breastmilk to make cereal. Or take three or four extra carrots, bake them for one hour in a covered dish at 350 F degrees while you're making the rest of the meal. Mash with a fork and serve to baby.

For babies 10 months and older: If your infant has a few teeth, he can eat plain cooked quinoa. Grind up sunflower seeds or parsley with your baby's grains for extra nutrients.

Garlic Sautéed Collards

There is nothing more nutritious for pregnant and nursing moms than dark green leafy vegetables. When you're looking for nutrients like vitamin A, vitamin C, calcium, and folic acid, think foliage.

8 cups chopped raw collard greens
1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil or ghee
1 tablespoon minced garlic
Garnish:

½–1 teaspoon brown rice vinegar
½ teaspoon tamari

For greens with tough stems, cut the leaves away from the stem before washing. Wash greens carefully. An easy way is to fill your sink with cold water and submerge the greens. If the water has a lot of sediment, drain the sink and repeat. Chop greens into thin strips.

Heat oil in a 10-inch skillet. Add garlic and sauté a minute or so. Add greens and keep them moving in the skillet. Turn frequently so that all greens reach the heat. When all greens have turned bright green, just begun to wilt, and exude a sweet, juicy flavor, remove from heat. Sprinkle vinegar and tamari over the top. Toss gently and serve.

Preparation time: 15 minutes

Makes two cups, four servings

For babies 10 months and older: Blend a teaspoon or two of cooked collards in their cereal or vegetables, which will help accustom baby's taste to this nutritious vegetable. (Children younger than 10 months are probably not ready for greens.)

Pear-Plum Crisp

This wonderful autumn dessert can also be adapted for other seasons. Use peaches and blueberries in summer. The recipe also can be doubled to feed a crowd.

1 cup rolled oats
1/2 cup whole wheat pastry flour
1/2 teaspoon sea salt
1/4 cup cold-pressed vegetable oil
1/4 cup maple syrup
1/3 cup chopped walnuts
2 tablespoons water
2 tablespoons maple syrup or concentrated fruit sweetener
1 teaspoon cinnamon
1/4 teaspoon nutmeg

2 teaspoons vanilla extract

5 cups sliced pears and plums (about 3 pears and 5 plums; replace the pears with apples if desired)

Preheat oven to 350 degrees F. Mix oats, flour, and salt together in a bowl. Add oil and sweetener; mix well. Stir in nuts and set aside. In a small bowl combine water, syrup, spices, and vanilla extract; set aside. Slice fruit and place in a lightly oiled pie pan or an 8-by-8-inch baking dish. Pour the liquid mixture over the fruit and toss gently. Spoon the oat-nut mixture evenly on top of the fruit. Cover and bake 45 minutes. Uncover and bake an additional 15 minutes to crisp the topping.

Preparation time: 1 hour and 20 minutes

Makes eight servings

For babies six to 10 months: Reserve extra pears or plums. Slice and bake in a separate dish while the crisp is baking. Remove and blend. For babies 10 months and older: Remove some of the baked pear and plum from the bottom of the crisp. Puree and serve. You can also use extra rolled oats to simmer some oatmeal. Add ground walnuts to the cereal for extra nutrition.

Simple Baby Food Recipes

Here are three easy and nutritious baby recipes:

Rice and Veggies

This is an easy, nutritious recipe with lots of veggies. Use only whole grain brown rice, as white rice is much lower in nutritional value. You can use the slow-cook rice if you like, but if you are short on time, instant whole grain brown rice is an easy alternative.

Prepare 1 cup of brown rice

Set aside most of the rice (less a normal serving size for your child) and save it in an airtight container in the fridge for future meals. Use within one week.

Thoroughly wash and prepare the following fresh vegetables*:

Broccoli - Use only the florets, the stems can cause gas.

Carrots - Remove skin, chop into rounds

Green Beans - Cut off the ends and remove any strings

Yellow Squash - Leave the skin on, chop into rounds

Steam vegetables for approximately 10 minutes, or until very tender. Carrots tend to take the longest to steam, so put them in first.

Cut into small pieces for advanced eaters, or puree in food mill for beginners

Combine rice and veggies for a colorful, delicious and healthy meal!

*Extra Tip - this recipe is even easier if you prepare the vegetables ahead of time in batches and freeze them in individual serving sizes (ice cube trays work best). All you have to do is pop out a frozen cube of each veggie, and heat it up.

Cheesy Beans and Rice

So simple, so nutritious, so good. Make the beans and rice in batches ahead of time and freeze to use in a variety of meals.

Beans

Use the dry beans in the bag, canned beans are typically very high in sodium. If you do use canned, rinse them well before cooking to remove the extra sodium in the liquid. This recipe works best with red or black beans.

Rinse beans and sort out any bad ones

Soak beans overnight (6-8 hours)

Drain Beans

Put beans in a large pot and cover completely with water

Lightly simmer beans for 2-3 hours or until soft

Set aside most of the beans (less a normal serving size for your child) and save in an airtight container in the fridge or freeze them for future meals.

Puree beans in a food mill, or mash thoroughly with a fork (make sure there are no skins intact as they can be a choking hazard).

Use some of the rice set aside from the first recipe.

Cut mild or medium cheddar cheese into small cubes.

Combine beans, rice and cheese and enjoy!

Avocado, Tomato and Sweet Pepper Salsa

A fun, colorful dish for summer days. Parents will like this one too.

Cut one red and one orange sweet pepper in half and remove the core and seeds

Roast over the grill or on stovetop until soft

Chop peppers into small chunks

Cut one quarter of a soft, fresh avocado into small chunks

Cut one quarter of a ripe tomato into small chunks

Toss avocado, peppers and tomato together for a zesty salsa treat!