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# Foodie from the start

*Even if those first solids are far off in the future, your tot's palate has already begun to take shape. Research suggests that rousing her taste buds early on could be the key to avoiding a picky eater.*

BY TIFFANY R. JANSEN

**C**hicken nuggets or noodles and the occasional pizza: Anything else elicits a skeptical eye and a wrinkled nose from 6-year-old Sean W. “A lot of times he’ll say he doesn’t like something before he even tries it,” says his mother, Kathleen, of Gaithersburg, Maryland. “It’s frustrating because I don’t want to give him the same thing all the time, but it’s so hard to get him to try new things.”

Most parents of young children can relate. More than 20 percent of kids ages 2 through 6 are selective eaters, according to a 2015 study from the Duke University School of Medicine. It turns out the struggle to get kids to branch out and try new things is real.

But what if you could set your child on the path to becoming an adventurous eater before she even takes her first bite of real food? Although there’s no way to guarantee that you won’t wind up with a finicky appetite, there are steps you can take to try to head off fussy eating before it starts.

## FAST FACT

**A baby's taste buds are fully developed by the 15th week of gestation.**

## You are what your mother eats

There’s no need to wait until your baby is slurping purées and gumming soft solids to start expanding her palate. In fact, the best time to introduce your baby to new flavors is before she’s born.

An amniotic sac filled with fluid surrounds your baby in the womb. That fluid is flavored by what you eat. Babies can detect these flavors when they swallow

the amniotic fluid, says Julie Mennella, who studies food and flavor preferences at the Monell Chemical Senses Center in Philadelphia.

Don’t worry if your pregnancy diet isn’t all fresh fruits and vegetables. The idea is to expose your baby to a wide variety of flavors—not turn her into a veggie fiend.

During her first pregnancy, native Texan Courtney Nales craved sushi.\* “We went out for sushi practically every week,” says the mother of two. “[My oldest] is now 5 and eats any kind of raw, smoked or cooked fish like it’s his job.” His go-to lunch? Sushi.

Noshing on, say, Indian food during pregnancy doesn’t necessarily mean that your child will go crazy for curry, but ample research has shown that babies do tend to be more accepting of foods they experienced in the amniotic fluid. >>

*\*Vegetarian sushi and sushi containing cooked fish, such as California rolls, are safe to consume during pregnancy. Just be sure to let the chef know you’re expecting, so he can swap to a clean knife and prep surface to avoid cross-contamination.*



## Taste testing

There are four basic tastes: **sweet, salty, sour and bitter**. Humans are hardwired to favor sweet and salty. “Sweet is our signal for calories; salt is our signal for a need in minerals,” says Julie Mennella, a food and flavor preferences researcher.

That same biology prompts us to avoid bitter, a taste generally associated with toxins. Exposing your baby to all four tastes, especially sour and bitter, early and often will make her more likely to accept and appreciate them.





In other words, the best way to encourage your child to become an adventurous eater is to broaden your own diet while your baby's still in the womb.

## A taste of what's to come

Breast milk, much like amniotic fluid, is flavored by what a mother consumes. So a varied diet during lactation is just as important as a varied diet during pregnancy.

In a study conducted by Mennella and her colleagues at Monell, babies who were exposed to carrots in utero and/or through breast milk were more accepting of carrot-flavored cereal than babies whose mothers were asked to avoid carrots altogether.

Though on par with breast milk nutritionally speaking, formula unfortunately doesn't offer the same sensory variety that breast milk does.

"Formula tends to be very mono-flavored," says Amy Bentley, a food studies professor at New York University's Department of Nutrition and Food Studies and author of *Inventing Baby Food: Taste, Health, and the Industrialization of the American Diet*. Nicole Silber, RD, nutritionist at Middleberg Nutrition in New York City agrees. "It's the same every single time the babies eat it," she says.

But that doesn't mean that formula-fed babies have to miss out. Starting at about 4 months, flavors can be introduced by dipping your finger in soup, broth, or some type of vegetable, fruit or meat juice and letting your baby suck it off. If your pediatrician has your baby on a vitamin D supplement, those liquid drops, when added to your baby's bottle, will also alter the flavor of the formula.

Smell plays an enormous role in food memories and experiences, so be sure to stimulate your baby's olfactory system as well. "Have [her] in [her] rocker right outside the kitchen so that when you're cooking, [she] can smell the flavors," Silber suggests.

Regardless of whether your baby is breast- or formula-fed, the key is to expose her to an array of flavors and scents as early as possible.

## Sold on solids

By about 4 to 6 months, your baby will be ready to add solid foods to the mix. Silber suggests starting with a smooth purée before moving to a more applesauce-like consistency, and then to a thicker texture akin to oatmeal.

From there, you can offer your baby small chunks of soft or dissolvable foods, like a very ripe avocado or some Cheerios, so she can practice self-feeding and chewing.

"The No. 1 thing I recommend [when] introducing solids to babies is to have them touch the food—that's so important," says Silber. Yes, things are going to get messy, but to fully experience a food, your baby needs to be free to use all her senses—touch included.

Continue to introduce your baby to a host of new flavors, textures, colors and smells, but keep in mind that new things require some getting used to. Studies show that babies who are repeatedly exposed to a certain food are more accepting of it.

## good to know ...

According to a review published in the journal *Appetite* earlier this year, picky eating typically peaks at about 2 years of age and tapers off around age 6. So, remember: This too shall pass.

The best way to get your child on track to becoming a healthy and adventurous eater is to model those qualities yourself. "Don't feed babies separately from what you're eating," Mennella advises. "Make them part of the family. Offer a variety of healthy foods, and eat those same foods."

At the end of the day, finicky eating happens, due to no one's fault and despite everyone's best intentions. Keep modeling healthy eating habits and making a variety of foods available, and trust that your child will come back around eventually. **P&N**

**Get a head start**  
Your baby's taste preferences take shape during the first 2 to 5 months of life, so the more you can expose her to a wide variety of flavors and odors—especially from fruits and vegetables—the better.



## THE DISH ON BABY FOOD

It has been a staple of the infant diet since the late 1920s, and baby food doesn't look like it's going away anytime soon. Here are five things you need to know before adding baby food to your child's menu:

- 1 Baby food's smooth texture makes the transition from liquids to "real" food less jarring for little ones.
- 2 Once your tot gets the hang of ingesting food, you can ditch the purées in favor of chunkier options, like a roughly mashed banana or diced steamed carrots.
- 3 Whipping up your own mini's menu? Make the freezer your friend. Set aside one day to make enough food to last a week, and freeze it.
- 4 Homemade baby food can be as simple as taking a tiny portion of whatever the rest of the family is eating and puréeing it with some breast milk or formula.
- 5 Commercial baby food offers an inexhaustible range of flavors. "It's easy to go to the store and pick out a jar of fruits and vegetables that you yourself might not eat [at home]," says Amy Bentley, a food studies professor at New York University.