



Homemade Baby Food—Is it Right for You (or Your Baby)?

You love food, and you're comfortable in the kitchen. You enjoy cooking for your family, whether burgers on the grill or waffles for Sunday morning breakfast. You're a big believer in fresh is best, and you try to avoid processed foods. If you're a new mom, or a pregnant mother-to-be, you may be wondering: Should I be making my own baby food?

The answer to this question is, at its core, a very personal one. For many new moms, especially first-time mothers, the idea of making baby food on top of settling into a new routine, breast or bottle feeding, changing diapers, and getting enough sleep, is simply out of the question. As Melinda Johnson, a registered dietician, says: "There's enough pressure already with raising a new baby, and moms and dads don't need to feel guilty over opening a jar of pureed squash."

Johnson also stresses that most jarred baby food is not unhealthy. "A lot of parents think all processed food is bad, but with baby food it's not the same. Yes, it's been cooked, mashed, and heat-treated to make it stable, but there are no additives. If a manufacturer adds sugar or salt, they have to list it on the label, and yes, you should go ahead and avoid that food."

Some mothers feel comfortable using a combination of jarred products and certain, special homemade foods, which can be one easy way to give homemade baby food a try. For others, the idea of knowing exactly what goes into their baby's body is appealing and they may embrace homemade baby food completely.

In either case, there are some advantages to making your own baby food. For starters, it may save you money. A jar of banana baby food, for instance, might cost 90 cents for 4 ounces. Buying your own bananas is more economical ounce per ounce and there's less waste, says Lisa Barnes, author of "The Petit Appetit Cookbook." If your baby doesn't finish the entire jar of bananas, you may end up tossing it. But if your baby doesn't eat the entire banana, you can eat it yourself or use it in other recipes.

If you're interested in making your own baby food, all food and nutrition experts stress a very important point: be very careful of washing your hands, avoid cross contamination, pay careful attention to storage, and err on the side of caution. This is especially critical because you're talking about infants, which the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) includes in the "at-risk" category because an infant's immune system has not fully developed yet.

The USDA advises cooking all homemade baby food to 160F, then either cooling the food and feeding it to your baby immediately, or getting it into the fridge or the freezer as soon as possible to protect against bacteria growth. "Remember—the normal things that might make us sick or give us a touch of the flu, can be more serious or dangerous for babies," says Johnson.

Once you master the basics of food safety, you'll also need to understand the stages of when babies are ready for solids. Check with your pediatrician regarding this information, as every baby is different. While one baby may be ready for pureed squash, for instance, another may not.

Texture also plays a big part in baby food preparation—children ages 4-6 months generally need smooth and creamy foods, while older babies (ages 6 to 9 months) may be able to handle slightly lumpy purees. As with all baby-care issues, check with your pediatrician or medical professional for advice and suggestions before getting started.

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Recipe: Sweet Potato Puree

Reprinted with permission from The Petit Appetit Cookbook by Lisa Barnes (Penguin, 2005).

Most babies love sweet potatoes. They are much sweeter in taste and higher in nutrients than the basic white potato. Baking the potatoes in the oven may take longer but the flavor is much richer than steaming in the microwave or stovetop.

Makes 4 servings

2 medium (7- to 8-ounce) organic sweet potatoes

Water, formula, or milk

Oven method: Preheat oven to 425°F. Prick potatoes with a small knife and place on a baking sheet. Bake for 45 to 60 minutes or until tender and skin is wrinkled. Potatoes should pierce easily with a toothpick. Set potatoes aside to cool before handling. Using your fingers, peel potato skin from flesh. Mash with a fork for thicker potatoes or puree in food processor with a steel blade until mashed. For a smoother and less sticky texture add 1 to 2 tablespoons of water, formula or milk, at a time. Add liquid and process until you've reached desired consistency.

Microwave method: Prick potatoes with a knife and place potatoes in a microwave-safe dish. Add 1/4 cup water and cover tightly, allowing a corner to vent. Microwave on High for 3 minutes and turn potatoes over. Re-cover and cook for 3 to 6 minutes or until tender. Check for doneness, cool, and then proceed with directions above.

