Baby-led weaning – is it a safe alternative way to introduce first foods?

The practice of baby-led weaning for first foods (solids) is becoming increasingly common. As this involves not using purees as first foods for babies it is a little ‘left-field’ compared to texture recommendations made in the Australian Infant Feeding Guidelines(1). Research about possible pros and cons of this feeding practice is in its early days. If parents are considering or are engaging in baby-led weaning, it’s important to ensure it is done safely and appropriately to provide the best outcomes for their baby.Outlined in this fact sheet are a number of things to consider for this to be a safe and appropriate feeding practice.

What are the Infant Feeding Guidelines?
The Infant Feeding Guidelines were published by the Australian Government in 2012. They provide a review of the evidence at the time of publishing and evidence based recommendations on infant feeding.

What is baby-led weaning?
Baby-led weaning (BLW) involves infants feeding themselves hand-held foods instead of being spoon-fed by an adult. This self feeding practice is started when first foods are started.
Baby-led weaning

Let’s compare the current Infant Feeding Guidelines vs Baby-led Weaning (BLW) advice.

**Infant Feeding Guidelines (1)**

First foods or solids can be introduced at around 6 months of age as long as the infant shows signs of readiness.

These signs include:
- Good head and neck control.
- Ability to sit up almost on their own.
- Able to move food from the front to the back of the mouth and swallow.
- Chewing action.
- Interested in food and the environment.

**Baby-led weaning advice (2)**

First foods or solids can be introduced at around 6 months of age as long as the infant shows signs of readiness.

These signs include:
- Good head and neck control.
- Ability to sit up almost on their own.
- Able to move food from the front to the back of the mouth and swallow.
- Chewing action.
- Interested in food and the environment.
- Ability to use their hands to scoop and hold.
- Ability to bring their hands to their mouth.
## Baby-led weaning

### The order in which to introduce first foods

**Infant Feeding Guidelines (1)**

1. Start with iron-containing foods. For example, iron-enriched infant cereals, pureed meat, poultry and fish, or cooked tofu and legumes.

2. After the introduction of iron-rich foods, there are no recommendations regarding the order in which foods should be introduced. Vegetables, fruits, and dairy products such as full-fat yoghurt, cheese and custard can then be added, while continuing breastfeeding.

### How often can a new food be introduced?

**Infant Feeding Guidelines (1)**

Foods can be introduced at a rate that suits the infant. There are no recommendations on the number of new foods that can be introduced at one time.

**Baby-led weaning advice (2)**

Foods can be introduced at a rate that suits the infant. It is encouraged that family foods offered are foods the baby has shown interest in. There is no advice on the number of new foods that can be introduced at one time.

### Baby-led weaning advice (2)

There are no recommendations about which foods to introduce only advice about the texture of the food:

- Start with stick-shaped choices (or cut food into large strips) so baby can pick it up and hold it easily
- Examples of foods to start with include soft bite-sized pieces of cooked vegetables, e.g., broccoli or a finger of toast
**Are there any foods which should not be offered to babies as first foods?**

### Infant Feeding Guidelines\(^1\)

- Foods with added sugar, salt and honey.
- Foods that are a choking risk including whole nuts, hard pieces of fruit and vegetables and popcorn should be avoided.

### Baby-led weaning advice\(^2\)

- Foods that are a choking risk including whole nuts, hard pieces of fruit and vegetables and popcorn should be avoided.
- To make sure your baby doesn’t put too much in their mouth at once, limit how much food you put on their tray at one time, and never leave your infant alone while eating.

**What drinks are appropriate for babies under 12 months?**

### Infant Feeding Guidelines\(^1\)

- Exclusive breastfeeding until about 6 months of age.
- Continue breastfeeding till 12 months while introducing family foods.
- Keep tap water safe- it needs to be boiled and then cooled when giving to infants under 12 months of age.
- Small amounts of cow’s milk can be used in the preparation of solid foods but not given as a main drink to children until 12 months of age.
- Do not give beverages such as tea, coffee, soft drink, juices and cordials to infants.

### Baby-led weaning advice\(^2\)

- Exclusive breast-feeding until about 6 months of age.
- Continue breastfeeding till 12 months while introducing family foods.
- No other advice given.
Baby-led weaning

When can common food allergens be introduced?

Infant Feeding Guidelines(1)
Allergen containing foods including cooked egg, fish and smooth nut pastes can be introduced at the same time as other foods – around 6 months. All infants should be given allergenic solid foods in the first year of life. This includes infants at high risk of allergy.

Baby-led weaning advice(2)
No advice given.

What texture is appropriate for first foods?

Infant Feeding Guidelines(1)
From 6 months of age, infants should be offered purees and then mashed or lumpy foods, progressing to minced and chopped foods.

By 8 months most infants can manage ‘finger foods.’

By 12 months, infants can have nutritious choices from foods eaten by the family and should be consuming a wide variety of foods.

Baby-led weaning advice(2)
Introduce baby to family (solid) foods from around 6 months using soft finger foods rather than purees – hard foods that are choking risks are still to be avoided.

Foods should be firm enough to hold, but soft enough for baby to mash with their fingers.

BLW involves infants feeding themselves hand-held foods instead of being spoon-fed by an adult.

Summary

Both the Infant Feeding Guidelines and BLW practices encourage continued exposure and opportunity to sample a wide variety of healthy foods to help achieve healthy diets in childhood. Establishing these healthy eating habits early means they are more likely to continue through to adulthood and may assist in promoting better food choices later in life.
Baby-led weaning

When you compare the current Guidelines against common BLW practices as in the table above, there is some common ground, for example 1) Exclusive breastfeeding until about 6 months of age 2) ensuring baby is showing signs of readiness and 3) avoiding hard foods that are choking risks. But there are a few points of difference, for example, not recommending iron-rich foods first.

Generally healthcare professionals do acknowledge there could be benefits from BLW, with some research showing babies may more effectively develop self-regulation of their appetite and energy intake, helping to decrease risk of children becoming overweight. There are however, concerns about a potential increased risk of choking, iron deficiency, and inadequate energy intake.

More research is underway to more fully understand the potential benefits and risks of BLW. A large review of current research is due to be released in 2017.

Key considerations

1. Consideration 1 – Encourage exclusive breastfeeding until about 6 month of age and it is important to encourage iron-rich foods after 6 months of age as the amount supplied by breast milk will not be adequate by 9 months of age.

2. Consideration 2 – Encouraging a wide variety of healthy food choices early in life, helps promote health, wellbeing and healthy eating practices later in life.

3. Consideration 3 – By 8 months of age, regardless of the ‘first foods’ approach, children need to be experiencing soft and lumpy textures, finger foods by 10 months, and family foods by 12 months.

References
