

Nutritional requirements during the weaning period

The range of foods provides a range of nutrients in the diet (the wider the variety of foods in the weaning diet the wider the variety of nutrients). Protein, carbohydrate, fat and vitamins and minerals are all essential in the weaning diet and are provided by the range of foods and drinks consumed.

- Iron is essential for healthy blood and for general development. Breast milk is deficient in iron but babies are born with a store of iron, which is sufficient for their needs until the time of weaning. It is essential that the weaning diet provides a variety of iron containing foods to ensure that iron intakes are adequate.
- Vitamin D is essential for the absorption of calcium, and consequently for healthy bones. There is rising concern about the vitamin D status of children in the UK especially in “at risk” ethnic minority groups. There is little vitamin D in normal (non-fortified) foods and exposure to sunlight in the UK is often low due to weather patterns, use of sunscreens, and cultural dress habits which can encourage covering of exposed skin. Darker skinned individuals require more exposure to sunlight than lighter skinned individuals to manufacture adequate vitamin D.
- Sodium (found in salt) is an important nutrient but the requirement for infants is much lower than adults as their kidneys are not fully matured and hence not able to cope with excess sodium. Weaning foods are free from added salt for that reason.
- Carbohydrate is an important source of energy. The balance between the different types of carbohydrate is important. For instance too little fibre is a common cause of constipation whereas too much fibre is undesirable as large quantities fill up small stomachs at the expense of other nutrients.
- Fat is an important source of energy and provides essential fatty acids and helps in the absorption of fat soluble vitamins. As weaning progresses, the proportion of energy supplied as fat decreases whilst the proportion supplied as carbohydrate (mainly from starch) increases.
- Protein is also essential for the development and maintenance of body tissues, but too much should be avoided because babies have immature kidneys that cannot cope with high levels.