

Why is food safety so important for young children?



The [EYFS framework](#) requires providers to take all necessary steps to keep children safe and well. You must be confident that those responsible for preparing and handling food in your setting are competent to do so.

Children can choke at any age. However, younger children are at greater risk as their narrow airways are more easily blocked.

Babies' and young children's immune systems are not as strong and developed as adults'. This means they are more vulnerable to infections which can lead to food poisoning. It is important to take extra care with hygiene and preparing food safely.

There is a section on safer eating in the EYFS framework with detailed requirements on allergies, safe weaning and choking prevention. All providers must be aware of these requirements.

Food safety advice for children age 5 and under

How to reduce the risk of choking

Children can choke on any food. To minimise the risk of choking:

- remove any stones and pips from fruit before serving

- cut small round foods (like grapes, strawberries and cherry tomatoes) lengthways and into quarters
- cut large fruits (like melon) and hard fruit or vegetables (like raw apple and carrot) into slices instead of small chunks
- do not offer raisins as a snack to children under 12 months (they can be chopped up as part of a meal)
- soften hard fruit and vegetables (like raw apple and carrot) and remove the skins when first given to babies from around 6 months
- cut sausages into thin strips rather than chunks and remove the skins (sausages should be avoided due to their high salt content)
- remove bones from meat or fish
- do not give whole nuts to children under five years old
- do not give whole seeds to children under five years old
- cut cheese into strips rather than chunks
- consider wholemeal or toasted bread as white bread can form a doughy ball in the throat, and cut all types of bread into strips for very young children
- do not give children popcorn as a snack
- do not give children marshmallows or jelly cubes from a packet, either to eat or as part of messy play activities, as they can get stuck in the throat
- do not give children hard sweets

Supervision

Babies and young children should be seated safely in a highchair or appropriately sized low chair while eating. Babies and young children must never be left alone while they are eating and must always be within sight and hearing of a member of staff.

Where possible, sit facing children while they eat so you can:

- make sure children are eating in a way to prevent choking
- prevent food sharing
- be aware of any unexpected allergic reactions

When a child experiences a choking incident that requires intervention from a member of staff, such as back pats, you should record the details of the incident and inform parents and carers. This is to help spot any trends with the types of food that might be causing choking incidents.

The EYFS requires early years settings to always have a member of staff with a valid full course paediatric first aid certificate in the room when children are eating.

The criteria for effective Paediatric First Aid (PFA) training can be found in the [statutory framework for the early years foundation stage](#), Annex A.

Useful resources

- [Early years choking hazards poster and table - Foundation Years](#)
- [Preparing food safely for young children \(video\) - Early Start Nutrition](#)

Food and drinks to avoid

Drinks

Provide only fresh tap water and plain milk for children to drink. Fruit juice, smoothies, squash, fizzy drinks and flavoured milk, even when diluted, contain lots of sugar and can cause tooth decay. Diet or reduced-sugar drinks are not recommended for babies and toddlers either. These drinks can fill older children up so they're not hungry for healthier food.

Unsweetened, calcium-fortified plant-based drinks (such as soya, oat and almond drinks) can be given from 12 months as part of a healthy balanced diet. They should be avoided before 12 months, although small amounts can be used in cooking.

Do not give children under 5 rice drinks because of the level of arsenic they contain.

Foods to avoid before around 6 months of age

Ideally, babies should be introduced to solid foods from around 6 months of age. If parents or carers have decided to introduce solid foods to their child before 6 months of age, you will need to work closely with them to ensure a consistent and safe approach.

Children under 6 months of age should not be given:

- cow's milk
- eggs
- foods containing wheat or gluten, including wheat, barley and rye (like bread and pasta)
- nuts, peanuts and peanut products
- seeds
- fish and shellfish
- honey (avoid honey until 12 months old)

If a baby is less than 6 months old, sterilise water by boiling it first and then letting it cool right down. Once a baby is 6 months old, this is no longer necessary.

Foods to avoid up to 12 months

You should not give honey to infants under 1 year as it occasionally contains bacteria which can make them ill.

Foods to avoid up to 5 years

Children under the age of 5 should not be given:

- whole nuts and peanuts as they pose a choking risk (children can be given crushed or ground nuts and smooth peanut butter from around 6 months old)
- raw eggs, runny boiled eggs or foods containing partially cooked eggs like uncooked cake mixture (unless they have the red lion stamp or you see the words “British Lion quality”)
- foods high in salt such as sausages, bacon, crackers, crisps, ready meals and takeaways
- sugar, either in sugary snacks or added to food
- foods high in saturated fat such as biscuits, crisps and cakes
- fresh pate (meat, fish or vegetable-based) to reduce the risk of food poisoning
- unpasteurised milk, milk drinks and cheese, mould-ripened cheeses and soft blue-veined cheese, to reduce the risk of food poisoning (these cheeses can be used as part of a cooked recipe as listeria is killed by cooking)
- shark, swordfish and marlin, as the levels of mercury in these fish can affect a child’s developing nervous system
- raw shellfish, to reduce the risk of food poisoning - make sure any shellfish you use is thoroughly cooked.
- raw jelly cubes, as these are a choking hazard
- slush ice drinks, sometimes known as slushies, as they may contain too much glycerol

Foods to serve occasionally from 6 months to 4 years

Although it is recommended to provide oily fish in early years settings at least once every 3 weeks, do not provide it more than twice a week, as it can contain low levels of pollutants.

Useful resources

- [Early years foundation stage nutrition - GOV.UK](#)
- [Foods to avoid giving babies and young children - NHS](#)
- [What to feed young children - NHS](#)
- [Baby and toddler meal ideas - NHS](#)

Safe weaning

Progression from the introduction of first foods (at about 6 months), to a range of blended or mashed foods, and then to a wider range of chopped or minced foods should be a gradual process, based on each infants' developmental readiness, rather than a staged process based on age alone. You must make sure you are having ongoing conversations with parents and carers to ensure you help children move onto the next stage at a pace that is right for the child.

NHS Start for Life have lots of helpful information for parents regarding [safe weaning](#), which you will also find it helpful to refer to.

How to prepare infant formula bottles

Good hygiene is very important when making up a formula feed. Babies' immune systems are not as strong as adults' so all bottles, teats and feeding equipment need to be washed and sterilised before each feed. The NHS has a helpful step by step guide on how to prepare infant formula.

Useful resources

- [Your baby's first solid foods - NHS](#)
- [Help your baby enjoy new foods - NHS](#)
- [Drinks and cups for babies and young children - NHS](#)
- [How to make up baby formula - NHS](#)

Allergies

Early years settings and food providers should work closely with families to support children with allergies or intolerances. As part of the [EYFS framework](#), you are required to obtain information about children's special dietary requirements – including food allergies and intolerances – before they attend, and record and act on the information provided about children's dietary needs. This information must be kept up to date by having ongoing conversations with parents and carers.

There should be a protocol in place which is accessible to all staff, to ensure everyone is aware of individual children's allergies and symptoms.

At each mealtime and snack time a member of staff must be responsible for checking that the food being served to each child meets all their dietary requirements and is prepared in a way to prevent choking.

Understanding which allergens are present in every meal and snack you provide is an important step in providing food which is safe for children with food allergies and intolerances. Since 2014, all food businesses, including early years settings, have been required by law to give details about the allergens in the food they provide.

Useful resources

- [Food allergies in babies and young children - NHS](#)
- [Food allergy - NHS](#)
- [Free allergy support and resources - Allergy UK](#)
- [Allergen guidance for food businesses - Food Standards Agency](#)

Hygiene

Food should be stored, prepared and presented in a safe and hygienic environment. This is especially important when providing food for young children, as they may have a low resistance to food poisoning. It is also important that children are taught basic hygiene rules such as:

- not eating food that has fallen on the floor
- washing their hands with soap and warm water before eating meals or snacks and after going to the toilet or handling animals

Ensure food is cooked until steaming hot to kill harmful bacteria, and is then cooled sufficiently before giving it to infants and young children.

Wash all surfaces for preparing or eating food, especially chopping boards, with hot soapy water. Keep pets away from them. Make sure all bowls and spoons are washed with hot soapy water. Tea towels, kitchen cloths and sponges can harbour lots of germs, so wash them regularly.