Weaning usually begins around six months of age and although babies will still be getting most of their nutrients from milk, the introduction of foods is an important step in a baby’s development. During the weaning period, infants learn how to chew, swallow and even how to feed themselves. It’s a fun, messy time and crucial for helping babies become familiar with a wide range of different tastes and textures, as well as providing the extra nutrients required for growth. It’s also a key window of opportunity to encourage healthy eating habits that will continue into adult life.

How long does weaning take?
Over the course of the next six months babies will go from eating mashed or softly cooked food to eating three meals a day with healthy snacks. Every baby is different and they will progress through each stage at their own pace.

When to start weaning
Guidance from the Department of Health recommends starting weaning at around six months. Parents may feel their baby is ready before then. However, it is important not to introduce food before 17 weeks as babies’ digestive systems are still developing during this time, so solid food could cause problems for their tummies. If parents think their little one is ready to start weaning, they should speak to their healthcare professional for more advice.

Signs babies may be ready to begin weaning
As a baby develops, they will start to show signs they are ready to try solid foods. These include:

- Sitting up straight and being able to hold their head steady.
- Starting to swallow food, rather than pushing it out of their mouths.
- Co-ordinating their eyes, hands and mouth to pick up and put food in their mouths.

No sign alone means a baby is ready to wean and a combination of the above should be displayed before food is introduced.

What foods to start with
Fruit and vegetables are a key part of a healthy, balanced diet. As well as providing essential vitamins and nutrients, they offer a wide array of health benefits. Babies are born liking sweet tastes, so they may love trying fruit. However, some vegetables can prove a tricky challenge due to their bitter taste.
Easy 3-Step Weaning Process

It’s really important to encourage babies to eat vegetables. We recommend this easy-to-follow 3-step approach to help introduce vegetables early on, starting children on a path to healthy eating habits and the love of veggies for life.

1. **Start** with a single vegetable flavour

   Begin weaning by offering vegetables. It is important to offer single taste vegetables without mixing or disguising them with other foods, such as fruit. This will allow infants to learn to recognise the distinct vegetable flavours. Offering vegetables as a first weaning food can help promote long-lasting vegetable acceptance.

2. **Vary** the vegetable flavours

   Introducing a variety of vegetable flavours during weaning may help improve not only liking for vegetables, but also the willingness to accept new foods, such as meat or potatoes.

   A study found that babies who were introduced to five different vegetables in the first 15 days of weaning liked and ate significantly more of an unfamiliar vegetable one month later.

3. **Repeat** each flavour up to 10 times

   Remember, little ones are born with a natural aversion to bitter tastes like those in vegetables, and it is easy to give up when it looks like they don’t want to eat them. However, research shows that repeated exposure to the single vegetable flavours increases the chance they will accept them. Keep trying. This can take as many as 10 attempts with each food, but the effect is long-lasting.

   During this time it’s important to focus on whether children will continue eating and not their facial expressions. Brow furrowing, nose wrinkling and gaping are natural responses to bitter or unsweet tastes, but this doesn’t mean they won’t keep eating the food.

**Summary**

Early, varied and repeated exposure is the most effective way to encourage children to eat vegetables. Following these 3 simple steps can help ensure infants are given the best start to a healthy diet for life.

**References**