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MAKING YOUR OWN BABY FOODS

Making your own baby food is simple, convenient, and can save you money. Nutritionally, it's hard to beat the wholesomeness of foods right from your kitchen. You can feed baby some of your family's regular foods knowing that they are free from the additives and fillers found in some store-bought baby foods.

Family foods, if prepared with salt, spices, sugar, or fat, are not suitable for infants. You will need to prepare foods separately, or remove the baby's portion before salt, sugar, or other seasonings are added.

Making your own baby food doesn't require a lot of expensive equipment. At a minimum, all you need to get started is a clean pot to cook in and equipment to get the foods to the right consistency.

EQUIPMENT FOR PUREEING BABY FOODS

Some foods, such as bananas and other ripe fruits, require only a fork for mashing. A potato masher also works well to puree cooked apples, winter squash, potatoes, or carrots. Be sure to remove lumps, pieces of skin, strings, or seeds before feeding to baby.

A fine mesh sieve or strainer may be used to strain cooked foods.

Most foods can be pureed with a blender. Be sure to remove tough peels and seeds from vegetables and fruits before blending or they will be ground into the food. Use a blender to grind a handful of uncooked brown rice, cook well until soft and smooth, and you have a nutritious, inexpensive cereal for baby. For a good source of protein, nut butters (like peanut butter) can be made in a blender from whole nuts. Thin with water or formula into a consistency suitable for older babies.

Raw or cooked foods can handily be prepared in a small, hand-operated baby food mill. Peels and seeds are strained out of the food, and its small size is perfect for taking to the table or restaurant.

Some foods are ready to serve baby right from the grocery store. Try canned pumpkin, unsweetened applesauce, instant mashed potatoes, Cream of Wheat or rice cereal for quick, ready-to-eat additions to meals.

PREVENT FOOD-BORNE ILLNESS

Cleanliness is a priority when making foods for baby. Bacteria can easily upset a baby's digestive system; so anything that touches the food -- your hands and all equipment -- must be absolutely clean. The same rule applies when storing, heating, and serving baby foods, too.

Always wash your hands and equipment with hot, soapy water, rinse, and let air dry.

COOKING METHODS

Steaming is one of the best cooking methods to preserve vitamins and minerals in foods. Place the food in a steam basket, sieve, or colander above boiling water and cook in the rising steam.

Microwave cooking is another way to prepare foods, especially vegetables, which cook quickly in very little water.

Boiling or simmering fruits and vegetables is an acceptable cooking method but will result in loss of some nutrients in the cooking water. Be sure to use only a small amount of water and save the cooking liquid to thin the pureed food to eating consistency.

Since babies do not have a preference for salty or sweet, you should not add salt or sugar to their food. It's a good idea to keep your child from developing an early taste for such additions.

Studies suggest that feeding babies too much sodium may trigger high blood pressure later in life in those individuals who are likely to develop high blood pressure.

SERVING AND STORING BABY FOODS

Pureed foods spoil more easily than other foods; so baby's food must be used immediately or frozen for future use. If you store food in the refrigerator, keep it in there only 2 to 3 days. If you don't use it by then, it should be discarded. Remember: refrigeration does not kill bacteria; it only slows down their growth.

Large batches of pureed foods can easily be frozen in ready-to-use serving sizes. One such method is to pour pureed food into plastic ice-cube trays, cover with waxed paper, and freeze. When frozen, transfer to freezer bags. Another method is to "plop" drops of pureed food on a cookie sheet, freeze, and then transfer to freezer bags. These frozen portions will keep about one month.

Thaw cubes in the refrigerator, in a double boiler, in the microwave (at low

setting), or in the plastic bag under cold water. Do not thaw at room temperature.

WHAT TO SERVE

Fresh and frozen fruit juice, fruits and vegetables without added sugar or salt.

Home-canned and frozen fruits and vegetables without sugar, salt, or seasonings.

Whole-grain cereals such as rice, oats, barley, corn, and other grains.

As with any new food, wait 5-7 days before adding another new food to see if any allergic reactions occur.

Honey Alert: Do not feed honey in any form to infants under 1 year of age. Serious food poisoning (infant botulism) may result.

RECIPES

Here are some simple baby food recipes to get you started.

COOKED LEAFY GREENS

(Makes 10 food cubes)

Many of the most nutritious veggies, especially the green leafy ones, are not available in commercial baby foods. It's easy to make your own.

1 pound fresh greens (kale, collards, etc.)

1 Tablespoon water

3 Tablespoons fruit juice

Wash leaves thoroughly. Steam most greens 5-15 minutes, leaving the lid off for the first few minutes. Puree in blender with the water and juice.

Total Calories Per Cube: 17

BASIC VEGETABLE RECIPE

(Makes 8 food cubes)

Do not add salt, sugar, or fat.

1 cup cooked fresh or frozen vegetables without salt (use potatoes, green beans, peas, carrots, yellow squash)

4-8 Tablespoons cooking liquid, formula, or water

Press vegetable chunks through a sieve or baby food mill, thinning with cooking liquid or formula to eating consistency. Or, puree

vegetables and liquid in blender until smooth. Serve or freeze.

Note: After trying single foods, good combinations are potatoes and carrots or carrots and peas.

Total Calories Per Serving: varies

FRESH FRUIT

(Makes 4 food cubes)

Try different varieties of fruit in this recipe.

3/4 cup ripe fruit (uncooked peaches, nectarines, bananas, pears, apricots, apples)

1 teaspoon unsweetened fruit juice

1 teaspoon lemon-flavored water (1 teaspoon lemon juice to 1 cup water to prevent darkening)

Remove skin and seeds from fruit. Puree ingredients in baby food mill or blender until smooth. Serve or freeze.

Total Calories Per Serving: varies

SOYBEAN PUREE

(Makes 2-1/2 cups or 12 food cubes)

Serve this nutritious dish to your baby.

1 cup dry soybeans

3 cups water

3/4 cup unsalted tomato juice for thinning

Rinse and soak the soybeans overnight in the refrigerator.

Simmer beans in 3 cups water for about 2 hours. Puree with any equipment, adding tomato juice to thin.

Total Calories Per Cube: 34

FRESH ORANGE SHERBET

(Makes 1-2 cups)

Babies will love this dish.

1 sweet orange, peeled, sectioned, and seeds removed

1 cup fruit juice

In a blender, liquefy the fruit. Add the juice and blend. Pour into loaf pan, cover, and freeze until fairly firm, about 1 hour. Pour back into blender, and blend at low speed until smooth. Return to pan and freeze until firm.

Total Calories Per 2 Tablespoons: 7

HOMEMADE FRUITY GEL (Serves 4)

This recipe uses fruit juice instead of sugar to add sweetness. Agar, the thickener, is derived from seaweed. It is available in natural food stores and food co-ops.

1/2 cup cool water
1 Tablespoon agar flakes
1-1/2 cups fruit juice
1 cup pureed fruit

Place water in small saucepan. Sprinkle in agar and stir to dissolve. Add juice and heat for 1 minute, stirring well. Pour into 4 small cups.

Place in refrigerator. After 1/2 hour, stir in pureed fruit.

Total Calories Per Serving: varies

SWEDISH HARD BREAD (Makes 20)

Unlike store-bought varieties, this homemade version of "hard tack" crumbles and melts in baby's mouth and is great for teething.

1 cup all-purpose flour
1 cup rye graham flour
2 Tablespoons sugar or other sweetener
1/2 teaspoon baking soda
1/2 teaspoon baking powder
8 ounces commercial corn muffin mix
3 Tablespoons margarine
3/4 cup soy milk

Mix dry ingredients. Cut in margarine. Add soy milk. Mix well. Roll thin, cut into shapes and bake 10-15 minutes at 350 degrees until brown.

Total Calories Per Cracker: 116

CARROT/APPLE MIX

(Serves 2)

This is a delicious dish.

1/2 medium apple, cored and peeled 1/2 carrot, washed and peeled

2 Tablespoons fruit juice

1 teaspoon lemon juice

Puree all ingredients in blender. Or, grate apples and carrot and mix with juice before serving.

Total Calories Per Serving: 35