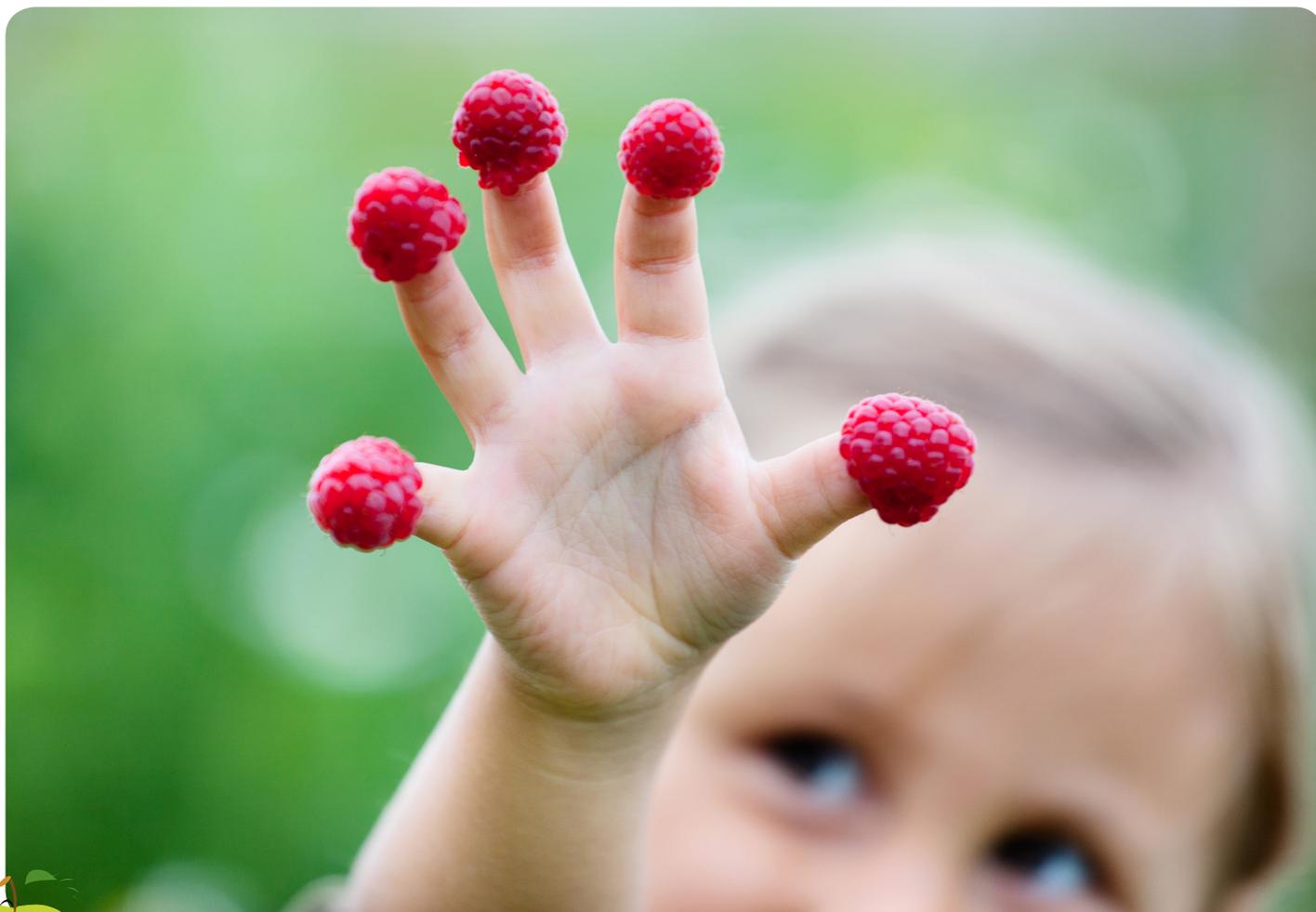


Finger foods are a great way for young children to get to grips with new foods. Some parents prefer to use this approach for all meals and snacks (aka baby-led weaning), whilst others may prefer to use a combination of finger foods and spoon feeding. Having looked at the research and from a practical viewpoint we think that a best of both approach is a good way forward. Offering finger foods alongside meals and also having them as snacks is a great way to introduce different eating modes to babies. So let's take a look at this in more detail...

Why are Finger Foods Important?

First up what are finger foods? These are easy-to-eat pieces of food that young children can pick up by themselves and eat independently, also known as 'self-feeding'. Over the last 10 to 15 years this method of feeding has become increasingly popular. Ongoing research is needed but finger foods seem to be beneficial for:

- Developing pincer grasp.
- Encouraging biting and chewing.
- Encouraging independent eating.
- Enabling the child to set the eating pace.



Foodie Fingers to Try

Initially it's best to begin with softer finger foods, remembering to wash all fruits and vegetables, remove any tough peel, pips or seeds and also to steam cook any fruit or vegetables that may be hard for them to eat right away.

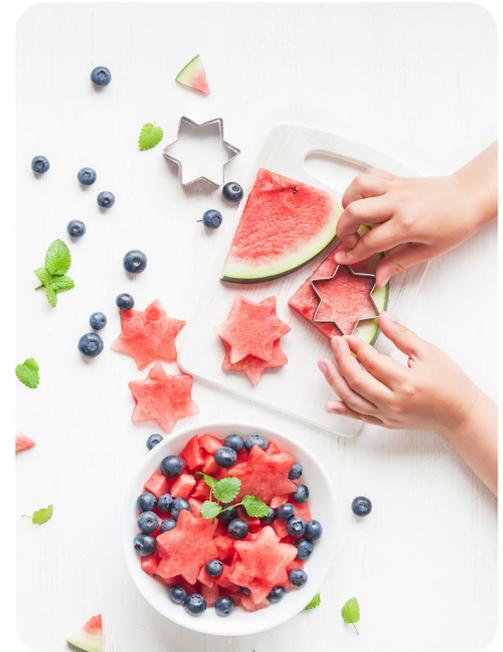
By around 6-7 months even with no teeth, babies' gums are hard with teeth just below the surface of the gums so babies can usually cope easily with gumming on soft finger foods.

As infants become used to finger foods and develop more teeth and a stronger bite then this is the time to begin offering a greater variety of finger foods. These then won't necessarily need to be boiled or softened as much.

Table 1: Ideas for Foodie Fingers

VEGETABLE.	FRUITY.	STARCHY.	PROTEIN.
Avocado strips	Banana	Cooked potatoes	Broad beans
Broccoli/cauliflower trees	Berries	Wholegrain toast	Cheese fingers
Butternut squash slices	Mango	Pitta bread strips	Chicken - fine strips
Carrots Cauliflower trees	Melon or seedless-watermelon	Breadsticks	Eggs (hard boiled)
Celery strips	Orange segments	Cooked pasta shapes	Fresh fish - strips or flaked
Courgette slices	Peach*	Wholegrain crackers	Green beans
Cucumber strips	Pear*	Oatcakes	Tofu cubes
Peas	Softened apples*	Plain rice cakes**	Sugarsnap peas
Peppers*	Strawberries	Quinoa corn cakes	
Purple or green broccoli trees	Kiwi	Tortilla strips***	
Sweet potato chunks	Plum slices		
	Lychee		

Key: *skin can be removed; ** avoid sweetened versions; ***beetroot and spinach varieties are also great for children.



Foodie Fingers to Dodge.

Theoretically any food that a child can eat by themselves can be classed as a 'finger food'. Unfortunately there are some less healthful options out there. Recently, some commercial foods marketed as 'first finger foods' have been pulled up for not dissolving as quickly in the mouth as they should, posing a safety risk to young children.² Only 1 in 20 finger food products evaluated in the US also met American Academy of Pediatrics nutritional recommendations.² So there is clearly a lot of work to be done and not just in the US. Bearing this in mind we have compiled a quick guide of finger foods to watch out for.

Finger foods to look out for.	Why?
Baby biscuits and rusks	Even though these may be advertised as ideal finger foods for your baby, it still doesn't always make them suitable. These biscuits are often no different from adult ones and can contain added sugar, salt, additives and palm oil.
Crisps	Again, often advertised as appropriate for your little ones these crisps can encourage a taste and habit for eating adult crisps. Often packaged in the same way as adult crisps, these soft finger foods are not ideal to offer on a regular basis if you're trying to encourage healthy habits.
Dried fruits	Although dried fruits are a convenient option when eaten alone they can stick to the teeth and increase the risk of tooth decay. Therefore it's a good idea to only offer dried fruit as part of a meal or alongside other foods at snack time.
Fried foods	Fried foods such as chips or chicken nuggets provide calories but very little in the way of nutrients. Children need to have nutrient-packed foods and it is also not a good idea to develop a taste for fried foods from such a young age.
Nuts	Babies could choke on whole nuts so these are not advised until 5 years of age. For younger children and where there is no family history of nut allergies smooth nut butters, ground and crushed nuts can be used.





Conclusions

There is no need for an all or nothing approach when it comes to offering finger foods after 6 months of age. Finger foods are a great addition to young children's diets, helping to develop their motor skills such as pincer grip and hand-eye co-ordination along with independence when it comes to eating. As a rule of thumb soft finger foods are good to begin with, gradually building on this and offering more variety as baby develops a stronger bite.



TOP TIPS FOR GIVING FOODIE FINGERS:

1. Aim to give young children a variety of foodie fingers that have a high nutrient density.
2. Spread veggie pureés onto toast or pitta fingers for an extra nutrient boost.
3. Add smooth nut butters, hummus or cream cheese to celery and cucumber strips.
4. As children get older involve them in the preparation of some foodie fingers – adding spreads, making foodie characters and arranging platters.
5. Finally, foodie fingers make perfect sharing plates when children have little friends around.

Please note

This fact sheet has been based on scientific evidence available at the time that it was written. The information contained in this commentary is not a substitute for medical advice or treatment. We recommend consultation with your doctor or health care professional if you have any concerns around your child's health.

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Further Information: www.littlefoodie.org

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1. Brown A et al. (2017) Baby-Led Weaning: The Evidence to Date. *Curr Nutr Rep* 6(2):148-156.
2. Awadalla N et al. (2017) Chew on This: Not All First Finger Foods Are Created Equal. *Clin Pediatr (Phila)* [Epub ahead of print]

