

GROWTH AND YOUR 4 TO 7 MONTH OLD

Babies this age continue to bloom - in size, physical skills, and ability to interact with the world. In most cases, this is the age when babies begin to respond to their name, reach for objects, sit alone, and make happy sounds - or show frustration when a new skill proves too hard to master right away.

Many of the new skills they are learning will come in handy for eating solid food. In fact, sometime during this period, your baby will probably get that first taste of food beyond breast milk or formula. Although breastfeeding or formula feeding will continue to be your child's main source of nourishment, he or she can start to explore different tastes and textures. As long as your baby continues to grow steadily, eating habits shouldn't be a cause of concern.

How Much Do Babies This Age Grow?

Babies continue to grow quickly in this period, gaining an average of about 1.5 to 2 pounds (700 to 900 grams) a month at first. At about 6 months, growth often slows slightly, to about 1 to 1.25 pounds (450 to 600 grams) a month. That rate usually continues until the first birthday, when growth slows a bit more. Babies' length also continues to increase greatly, perhaps 2 inches (6 centimeters) during this period.

There is no strict rule of thumb about how much a baby should weigh at this stage, but by 8 months he or she will probably weigh about 2.5 times more than he or she weighed at birth. A 7-pound (3000-gram) newborn, in other words, is likely to weigh 17-18 pounds (7,500-8,000 grams) by the end of this period.

Since your child's birth, the doctor has been recording his or her growth in weight, length, and head size (circumference) during your regular well-baby visits. The doctor tracks these figures on standard growth charts. Ask your doctor to show you your baby's growth record. By now, you should begin to see a personal growth curve emerging - expect your child to continue growing along this curve.

Should I Be Concerned?

Is my baby too fat? Too thin? Is my child destined to be tall or short? Parents often worry about growth and may compare a baby with siblings and peers. It's important to remember that children come in a wide range of shapes and sizes.

Growth depends on many factors, including:

- genes passed on by the parents (children tend to resemble their parents in height)
- the amount and quality of food a child eats
- overall health of the child
- the functioning of the hormones that control aspects of the child's growth

Based on your child's growth chart, the doctor can determine whether your child is growing as expected. If at any time you are concerned about your baby's weight or growth in general, discuss your worries with your child's doctor. In response to your concerns, your child's doctor may ask you the following questions:

- How many feedings a day does your baby get?
- How much does your baby eat at each feeding?
- How long does a breastfeeding baby nurse at each feeding?
- What else are you feeding your baby?
- How frequent are your baby's bowel movements? What do they look like?
- How often does your baby urinate?

In addition, the doctor may ask questions about your baby's health and development. All of these factors together will help the doctor decide if your baby is growing at an appropriate pace. The doctor may recommend further medical evaluation if he or she thinks there may be an underlying problem that needs to be addressed.

Premature babies may still be behind in size compared with their full-term peers, but they should also be growing steadily at their own rate.

What About the Chubby Baby?

With all the recent concern about childhood obesity, parents may worry that their baby is getting too fat. If you have this concern, discuss it with your child's doctor. A few babies and toddlers are overweight. For these children, professional advice from the baby's doctor can be useful.

But never withhold food from a baby in an attempt to cause weight loss. To grow and develop as they should, babies need proper nutrition, including fat, in their diet. Rather than limiting food intake, make sure the foods your baby eats are nutritious rather than full of "empty" calories. For instance, many babies drink a lot of apple juice, which is high in calories and has little nutritional value. Juice is not recommended for infants younger than 6 months. After 6 months, 100% fruit juice can be introduced in a sippy cup (limited to less than 4 ounces, or 118 milliliters, a day).

Introduce pureed vegetables and fruits without added sugar and don't give your baby desserts or other sweets that are high in sugar and offer little nutritional value. Also, look for the cues that your baby is full, and don't use food to keep a baby quiet or occupied. A crying baby may just be looking for some attention.

If you're concerned about your baby's weight - or even if you're not - it's a good idea to encourage your child to be active. For a baby this age, that means providing plenty of time when the baby is free to move around in a safe space rather than being confined to a carrier, stroller, or other equipment that limits movement. It also means playing in ways that encourage your baby to develop skills, such as reaching for objects, rolling, and crawling. Some parents take babies this age to organized exercise programs. That's fine if you and the baby both enjoy it, but such programs are not necessary.

You might also want to look at your own habits. If parents are overweight, have unhealthy eating habits, and get little physical activity, their children are much more likely than average to grow up to be overweight. Your child is growing so fast that before you know it, he or she will be copying what you do. It is never too early to start improving your own habits so you can be a better role model for the ones you love. Besides, being in good shape to run, jump, bike, and actively play with your child can be one of the great joys of being a parent. It's like being a kid again.

What's Next?

Your baby's rapid growth will start to slow down as his or her first birthday approaches. Expect big changes in the coming months as your infant becomes more mobile.

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