

Eating, Drinking and Swallowing

Feeding skills should generally follow this pattern:

Age	Skills observed
Newborn	Newborns are ready to suck and swallow from birth. They will exhibit the rooting reflex to search for food.
3 months	At this age infants will gain a little more head control. They may lose a little more liquid from their mouths when sucking than they did at birth.
6 months	Infants will eat and drink in an upright position supported in a high chair. Eating skills are now more voluntary than reflexive. An infant should begin to accept and manage smooth solid textures but may still be pushed out of the mouth by the tongue sometimes. Cup drinking can be introduced.
9 months	At this age infants should be able to sit upright unsupported. An infant should begin to try lumpier solids and some soft foods for biting and chewing. An infant will be keen to be involved in the meal by this age and will want to hold the spoon and explore the foods with his hands. The gag reflex is often quite apparent at this stage.
12 months	By one year a child should manage coarsely chopped table foods and some easily chewed meats. They have no difficulty with lumps or foods with two textures (e.g. fruit lumps in yoghurt). If teeth are present, they will be able to bite a piece off a biscuit. At this age children can take liquids by bottle, breast, cup or straw. Some coughing or choking may happen if the flow of liquids is too fast.
15 months	Children can be given more challenging foods that require breaking up by chewing. Less spillage occurs now when drinking. Coughing and choking become rarer.
18 months	Toddlers can feed themselves with their fingers or a spoon and drinking is completely independent. The mouth can still be open for chewing and children may overstuff their mouths making eating more difficult! There should be minimal loss food or liquid loss during eating.
2 years	By this stage a child should have a completely mature eating and drinking pattern although small refinements will

	still be made over the next few years.
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(adapted from "Pre-Feeding Skills, 2nd edition, S. E. Morris and M. D. Klein, 2000)

How to Help

These guidelines are general and lots of children vary a little in what they can manage at different ages and stages. If you feel your child is particularly struggling with feeding then talk to your health visitor in the first instance and a referral to the speech and language therapy service may be appropriate.