



The Four Pillars of Complementary Feeding: Foundation for Lifelong Health

The complementary feeding phase from 6 to 24 months is a critical window in an infant's life. Poor feeding practices can lead to stunted growth and malnutrition. The Four Pillars outlined below ensure optimal nutrition during this transitional phase from infancy to toddlerhood^{1, 2}.

The Four Pillars of Complementary Feeding

1. **Timely -Right time and frequency^{3, 4}**

- Complementary feeds should start at 6 months of age with continued and on demand breastfeeding till 2 years of age
- Feeding frequency should be age appropriate
- Starting too early (<4 months) or too late (>8 months) can lead to nutritional deficiencies and growth faltering

2. **Adequate -Right Amount/Quantity⁴**

- Complementary feeds should be initiated in small portions, with gradual increase in quantities.
- This is in addition to frequent breastfeeding.
- Meals should be energy-dense with inclusion of foods rich in iron, zinc, and vitamin A to meet growing needs.

3. **Appropriate -Diversity in taste, flavor, colour, food groups⁴**

- Complementary foods must include a diverse range of tastes, textures, colors, and food groups.
- This promotes healthy eating habits and ensures dietary adequacy

4. **Safe -Hygiene Cooking and Quality^{4, 5}**



Four Pillars of Complementary Feeding

- Foods should be prepared with strict hygiene protocols to avoid infections and prevent growth retardation
- It is advised to practice responsive feeding and do away with bottle feeding

Review 1 (Krebs NF, Hambidge KM, 2007)³

Aim: To review the clinical factors that influence the appropriate timing and nutrient composition of complementary feeding in infants.

Participants: Exclusively breastfed infants transitioning to complementary feeding.

Intervention: Review of the literature with an emphasis on cultural practices in complementary feeding, developmental maturity, timing of introduction, and important nutrients (iron, zinc).

Results: The study highlighted that in order to meet infants' needs beyond six months, it is crucial to introduce nutrient-rich complementary foods on time, particularly those that are high in iron and zinc

Review 2: (Ahmad A, Madanijah ,2018)⁵

Aim: To study association of complementary feeding practices with nutritional status of Indonesian infants

Participants: Infants(6-23months) and their caregivers in selected areas of Aceh, Indonesia

Intervention: Observational evaluation of WHO-recommended complementary feeding indicators, such as meal frequency, nutritional variety, and the proper introduction of solid and semi-solid foods.

Results: Higher rates of stunting and underweight were substantially correlated with poor complementary feeding practices, low diet diversity and insufficient meal frequency.

The four main pillars of complementary feeding—timely introduction, adequate, appropriate, and safe feeds —are essential for early infant development. When combined, they lower the risk of disease and undernutrition, promote healthy lifestyle choices, and guarantee optimal nutrition.

References

¹ Saran R, Kasar J, Jha M, Sahu JK, Babu SS, Mutreja A. Building blocks of life: improving nutrition and health outcomes through fortification and breastfeeding in the first 1000 days of a child's life. *Front Nutr.* 2025; 12:1517247. doi:10.3389/fnut.2025.1517247

² Sharma M, Gaidhane A, Choudhari SG. A Review of Infant and Young Child Feeding Practices and Their Challenges in India. *Cureus.* 2024;16(8):e66499. Published 2024 Aug 9. doi:10.7759/cureus.66499

³ Krebs NF, Hambidge KM. Complementary feeding: clinically relevant factors affecting timing and composition. *Am J Clin Nutr*. 2007;85(2 Suppl):639S-645S. doi:10.1093/ajcn/85.2.639S

⁴ WHO Guideline for complementary feeding of infants and young children 6–23 months of age [Internet]. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2023. Available from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK596427/>

⁵ Ahmad A, Madanijah S, Dwiriani CM, Kolopaking R. Complementary feeding practices and nutritional status of children 6-23 months old: formative study in Aceh, Indonesia. *Nutr Res Pract*. 2018;12(6):512-520. doi:10.4162/nrp.2018.12.6.512