

Weaning Wisdom: Unlocking Growth and Development

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INTRODUCTION

Weaning is the gradual process of introducing solid and semi-solid foods to an infant's diet while continuing breastfeeding also known as complementary feeding.¹ Traditionally, the term "weaning" referred to the cessation of breastfeeding; however, it now emphasizes supplementation, not replacement, of breast milk. As per (UNICEF-1984), it is a systematic transition that provides the necessary nutrients for growth and development beyond what breast milk alone can offer.⁽¹⁾

This transition is a critical stage in a child's life, not just physically, but also emotionally and developmentally. In both modern health sciences and traditional systems like Ayurveda, weaning is seen as a vital part of child nourishment that requires careful planning, timing, and cultural sensitivity.

Weaning begins typically at six months of age, aligning with the infant's growing nutritional needs and decreasing stores of maternal immunity. The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends continuing breastfeeding along with suitable complementary foods up to two years or beyond.⁽²⁾

Ayurveda, regards diet (*Ahara*) as a fundamental support of life under the concept of *Traya Upastambha*, highlighting the central role of nutrition in maintaining the health and vitality. The quality and suitability of food consumed directly influence the body's growth, strength and overall development.⁽³⁾

Nutritional needs differ among individuals based on factors such as age, gender and physical activity. A well-chosen diet supplies adequate energy for essential functions including metabolism, tissue repair and maintenance of bodily systems.

Special importance is given to childhood nutrition, as this period is marked by rapid growth and development. *Acharya Kashyapa* emphasis on careful consideration should be given to the place, time and digestive capacity of the child to ensure optimal health while planning a child's diet.

COMPLEMENTARY FEEDING IN AYURVEDA: STANYAPANAYANA

After 6 months of age, breast milk alone cannot fulfil the increasing nutritional needs of the infant, introducing the additional foods is necessary to support continued growth and development.

Complementary feeding, when practiced alongside continued breastfeeding, ensures adequate growth, development which is accomplished by nutritional food.

In Ayurveda, the process is well-aligned with developmental milestones:

- At Birth: honey (*Madhu*) and ghee (*Ghrita*) may be administered traditionally.
- 1st Month: Breastfeeding begins.
- 6th Month: Introduction of fruits in smashed or juice form. For the nutritional needs like vitamin and minerals, fruits (*Phalaprashana*)
- 10th Month: Introduction of semi-solid foods (*Annaprashana*)
- 12th Month: Transition to family pot or solid foods while continuing breastfeeding to start from 1 year.⁽⁴⁾

Weaning represents an important developmental milestone that influences both the emotional and behavioural growth of the infant. As the child gradually transitions from exclusive breastfeeding to complementary feeding, they begin to spend short periods away from the mother during feeding, develop self-feeding skills by picking up food with their hands, and learn to eat from bowl or plate, explores different food textures. This process fosters independence while strengthening cognitive, motor and social development.

A child's emotional well-being during this transition is just as important as physical health. According to WHO, emotional stimulation, responsive feeding, and attentive care during illness all contribute to healthy growth and development.⁽⁵⁾

METHODOLOGY OF WEANING

Ayurveda describes the phased reduction of breastfeeding (*stanyapanayana*) along with the introduction of fruits (*phalaprashana*) and semisolid foods (*annaprashana*) as a key developmental transition in late infancy.

Table-1⁽⁶⁾

ACHARYA'S	TIME PERIOD
1. <i>Kahyapa</i>	10 th month
2. <i>Vagbhata</i>	6 th month
3. <i>Sushruta</i>	6 th month

Table-2: Children are categorized according to their principal diet⁽⁷⁾

ACHARYAS	TIME PERIOD
1. <i>Ksheerapa</i>	Upto 1 year, mainly breast milk
2. <i>Ksheerannada</i>	Upto 2 years, milk with semisolid foods
3. <i>Annada</i>	Above 2 years, predominantly solid foods

PHALAPRASHANAM (Introduction of Fruits)⁽⁸⁾

1. *Kashyapa* is the only acharya who has explained this at 6 months of age.
2. Baby who is accustomed with *madhura rasa* alone will experience difficulty to adjust with *rasas* like *katu*, *tikta* etc so at this stage *phalaprashana* helps baby to adapt other *rasas* through *madhura amla rasas* of fruits.
3. *Kashyapa* considers dental eruption as the endpoint of *phalaprashana*.
4. Initially, central incisors erupt during 6-7th month. Eruption of teeth is indicative of GIT maturity to digest, absorb and assimilate nutrients.

5. Fruits familiarize the infant with different tastes and provide vitamins, minerals and natural antioxidants.
6. Introduce seasonal fruit juices in small quantities, ensuring that only one type of fruit is offered at a time.

Significance:

- *Draksha*- supports elimination of urine and stool
- *Matulunga*- light in digestion and cures abdomen distension
- *Kharjura, panasa* – acts as *bhrimana*.

ANNAPRASHANAM (Introduction of Semi-Solid Foods)⁽⁹⁾

1. This *samskara* is related to feeding of solid food for the first time to the baby.
2. Introduction of solid food is done only after the eruption of teeth. This is done in an auspicious day of *prajapati nakshatra* after worshipping the deva followed by *swastivachana* and *mangalacharana*.

Significance:

- It provides essential nutrients like iron, which is deficient in mother's milk
- It brings out change in taste in infant and also taste sensation develops.
- It initiates proper enzymatic function of GIT for the digestion of protein, carbohydrate and fats.

FACTORS INFLUENCING COMPLEMENTARY FEEDING

1. Maternal Factors- These include knowledge, attitude, self-efficiency, antenatal care visits and post-natal check-ups.

2. Socio-environment Factors- These include age, educational level, income, employment status, residence, mother's ethnicity and support.

3. Informational Factors- These include exposure to media and source of information.

4. Income- Inadequate or lack of income can determine complementary feeding choices.

5. Caregiver Knowledge- lack of knowledge among caregivers can lead to poor complementary feeding practices.

6. Allergy- cow milk allergy or lactose intolerance.

Table-3: TYPES OF COMPLEMENTARY FOODS

APPROPRIATE	AVOIDABLE
Combination of cereals and pulses, local staple foods	Bakery items, tinned fruits, foods with artificial and chemically preserved
Mashed banana, pulpy fruits, sweet potato	Fruit juices and drinks

Milk based cereals preparation	Commercial breakfast cereals
Sprouts, pulses, groundnuts, dry fruits	Fried foods

MODERN NUTRITION GUIDELINES ACCORDING TO WHO⁽¹⁰⁾

Two- Food Mixes: -

Staple + peas or beans
Staple + food from animals
Staple + dark green leafy vegetables or orange vegetable

Three-Food Mixes: -

Staple + peas or beans + food from animals
Staple + peas or beans + dark green leafy vegetables or orange vegetables
Staple + food from animals + dark green leafy vegetables
animals or orange vegetables

Four- Food Mixes: -

Staple + peas or beans + food from animal + dark green leafy vegetables or orange vegetables

ROLE OF STAPLE FOODS

A very good first food to give a baby, along with breast milk, is a soft, thick, creamy porridge, made from the staple food of the community. Every community has a main staple food. It is often the first food that people think of when asked about their diet.

The staple varies from place to place. It may be rice, wheat maize, cassava yam, potato etc.

The staple is an excellent base for preparing baby's first weaning foods because it is usually cheaper than other types of food, is easily available, and provides most of the carbohydrates (starch) and often other nutrients needed for growth.

AYURVEDIC PERSPECTIVE ON WEANING FOODS⁽¹¹⁾

Shashtika shali tandula mixed with *Sneha* and *saindhava-Pushti vardhaka*

Godhuma and *yava churna*- according to *satmya*

Lehana made from *vidanga*, *lavana* and *kodrava*- *Bhinna purisha*

Mrudvika, *madhu* and *ghrita*- *pitta* predominance

Matulunga rasa and *lavana*- *vata* predominance

Swarnaprashana- *agni vardhaka*

AYURVEDIC WEANING RECIPES:

Carbohydrate rich food should be taken as first choice for *annaprashana* as it is easily available, digestible and high energy yielding foods.

Rice preparations like *shashtika shali* should be taken, powdered rice can be mixed with different liquids like milk added with *ghrita* and salt and given to baby. This act as *pushtivardhan*.

Vagbhata explains certain nourishing food for weaning the baby. *Priyala majja* is rich in essential fatty acids mixed with *madhuka*, *madhu*, *laja* and *sita* cooked into a *modaka* form. This should be mixed with *deepaneeya* drugs, *lava tittira*, *sharkara*, *laja*, *saktu*, *dhataki pushpa* to enrich with energy.⁽¹²⁾

Shali, *Godhuma* and *Yava* preparations can be mixed with *vidanga*, *Lavana*, oil or *ghrita* and *ushna avaleha* are prepared, this act as nourishing food.

1. PEYA PATHYA (LIQUID PREPARATIONS)

Ideal for initial weaning phase (6–8 months), when the baby is transitioning from exclusive breast milk.

A. YUSHA (PULSES SOUP)

Mudga Yusha (Green gram soup) is highly recommended. Light, nourishing, easily digestible.

Can be prepared with a small amount of *ghrita* and salt.

B. MANDA (RICE WATER)

Supernatant water from cooked rice.

Easily digestible, helps in developing digestion.

Can be mixed with a little *ghrita* or *saindhava lavana*.

C. PHALA RASA (FRUIT JUICES)

Seasonal fruits like pomegranate, apple, or grapes (diluted).

Used in *phalaprashana samskara*.

Supplies vitamin C, natural sugars, and hydration.

2. PEYA PATHYA (SEMI-LIQUID PREPARATIONS)

For infants aged 8–10 months, as the digestive capacity improves.

A. KSHEERA PEYA (MILK-BASED THIN GRUEL)

Boiled cow's milk with rice powder or wheat flour.

Can be flavoured with *ghrita* and a pinch of cardamom.

B. SAKTU (ROASTED CEREAL FLOUR)

Prepared from roasted barley (*yava*), wheat (*godhuma*), or rice (*shali*).

Mixed with warm water or milk, optionally with *madhura dravyas* like jaggery.

3. VILEPI PATHYA (THICK GRUELS OR PORRIDGE)

Suitable for babies aged 10–12 months, during *annaprashana*.

A. ANNA VILEPI (RICE PORRIDGE)

Prepared from *shashtika shali* (red rice).

Cooked with milk or water, added *ghrita* and salt.

B. MUDGA VILEPI

Cooked green gram with rice.

Strength promoting, ideal for lean or weak children.

4. ANNA KALPANA (SOLID FOOD PREPARATIONS)

Introduced after eruption of teeth (~12 months), and as the child begins to eat from the family pot.

A. MODAKA (HERBAL-LACED ENERGY BALLS)

Prepared using *priyala majja*, *madhuka*, *madhu*, *laja*, and *sita*.

Enhances strength, energy, and digestion.

B. GHRITA-ANNA OR SNEHA-AVALEHANA

Soft rice cooked with *ghrita*, added with salt or mild spices.

Nourishes *dhatus* and helps in tissue development.

C. SHALI-GODHUMA-YAVA PREPARATIONS

Prepared with *vidanga*, *saindhava*, *ghrita* or *tila taila*.

Serve as *avaleha* (soft mash) or Upma type dishes.

TRADITIONAL AND HOMEMADE RECIPES:

- Kheer- rice + milk
- Ragi powder + jaggary + water
- Broken wheat + jaggary + water
- Boiled and mashed vegetables like carrot/beetroot + salt
- Mashed Banana + milk
- Supernatant Dal water
- Upma- Rava + water (mixed with salt and turmeric)
- Poha + coconut milk
- Mashed boiled potato + salt
- Banana chips dried in sun and made into powder added with jaggary
- Khichadi-in oil add cumin seeds and vegetables – sauté for some time and add turmeric, hing, salt

and water add washed moong dal + rice in pressure cooker

- Neer dosa- rice flour+ salt + water
- Veg dal- moong/ toor dal + veggies+ salt, turmeric and hing
- Apple puree- Peel apples and cut into pieces- put it into saucepan- add water until it becomes soft let it cool- mix in grinder until it becomes puree
- Papaya puree- same as apple puree
- Pumpkin kheer

PRINCIPLES OF WEANING

Weaning should be:

GRADUAL– Introduce one new food at a time, spaced 10–15 days apart to monitor tolerance.

FREQUENT– Babies need to eat approximately every two hours when awake.

NUTRIENT DENSE– Use energy rich, soft, and digestible foods.

Start with foods that are easy to digest and culturally appropriate.

Follow strict hygiene practices to avoid infections like diarrhoea.

Maintain breastfeeding alongside new foods.

According to Ayurveda, the *Paadamsika Krama* (gradual quantity progression) should be followed to avoid gastrointestinal disturbances and ensure acceptance of new foods. Before introducing a new type of food, any one type should be given for at least 10-15 days.

Table-4: HOMEMADE VS COMMERCIAL COMPLEMENTARY FOODS

ASPECT	HOMEMADE PREPERATIONS	COMMERCIAL PREPERATIONS
Variety of foods	Provides unlimited variety	Limited variety
Source of food	Any normal home cooked food	Manufactured according to established standards
Processing and Freshness	Usually fresh and minimally processed	Processed and packaged for longer shelf life
Consistency	Adjusted by grinding, sieving to suit the baby	Pre-determined by the manufacturer
Cultural Acceptability	Based on locally available culturally acceptable diets	Not always reflect local food habits
Convenience	Requires time and effort	Very convenient and easy to use, especially for working mothers
Transition to family diet	Helps baby to gradually adapt to regular family diet	Mainly designed as separate infant foods
Cost	More economical	More expensive but overcome seasonal unavailability of foods

Deepaneeya Dravyas (Appetizers): *trikatu* (*pippali*, *maricha*, *shunthi*) in minute amounts can be added with caution to enhance digestion.

Rasa Based Approach: Begin with *madhura rasa* foods like rice, milk, ghee as it is nourishing and most acceptable to infants.

Foods with a high risk of choking, such as nuts, whole grapes or raw vegetables should be excluded from their diet and meals should be free of coarse particles that may provoke gagging or vomiting.

Infants between 6-9 months need energy dense food with thick and smooth texture than watery, the ideal consistency is one that clings to the spoon, and cereals should be well-mashed and softened as advised by *Kashyapa*, especially after teething or around the tenth month.

DISCUSSION

Weaning is a vital transition influencing nutrition, immunity, growth, and emotional well-being. Modern science recommends starting at 6 months to meet rising nutrient needs, while Ayurveda emphasizes gradual (*Paadamsika Krama*) introduction of light, seasonal foods to protect digestion. Key challenges include infections, low nutrient density, and cultural barriers. Success requires continued breastfeeding, nutrient-rich semi-solids, strict hygiene, and responsive feeding. Integrating modern and Ayurvedic principles ensures a safe, nourishing, and culturally meaningful shift to a diverse family diet.

Improper complementary feeding practices remain prevalent due to socioeconomic and cultural constraints, adversely affecting child nutrition. Therefore, caregivers should be encouraged and guided to provide timely, balanced, and nutritious complementary foods.

CONCLUSION

Childhood is a crucial period for establishing healthy dietary that influence growth, development and overall well-being throughout life. Timely initiation of complementary feeding, while continuing breastfeeding, plays a key role in meeting the increasing nutritional demands of the growing infant. Caregivers should be encouraged to introduce safe, homemade, nutrient dense complementary foods prepared from locally available and culturally acceptable ingredients, while maintaining proper hygiene and responsive feeding practices.

Ayurveda offers a holistic perspective on complementary feeding through practices such as *stanyapanayana*,

phalaprashana and *annaprashana*, emphasizing gradual dietary transition in accordance with the child's digestive capacity and developmental readiness. These principles aim to support healthy growth, strengthen digestion and help prevent nutrition related disorders described in Ayurveda, such as *phakka roga*, *sosha* and *parigarbhika*.

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