

Super Baby Food Book Sample Chapter:

Preparing Vegetables for Your Super Baby

This chapter explains the general steps for preparing vegetables. The appendix [Specific Fruits and Vegetables](#) gives specific information on individual vegetables. For example, look at the details for [carrots](#). Included is how to choose the best carrots at the supermarket, when they are in season, cooking times, how old your baby must be to eat carrots, and other information specific to carrots.

Buying and Storing Vegetables

In the best of circumstances, we would walk out the door of our homes to the beautiful, organic garden growing in the back yard and choose a healthy, ripe vegetable. To obtain the most nutrients, we would cook it or eat it raw immediately. This case is not true for most of us, but let's keep it in mind as the ideal to help us remember how to buy produce.

How to Choose the Best Vegetables

Buy produce as free of pesticides as possible; certified organic is best. Pesticides affect small babies more adversely than adults.

Buy produce that is local. It is likely to have less pesticides and hasn't lost nutrients during a long transportation process. Visit your local Farmers' Market or roadside stand.

If possible, buy vegetables that have ripened on the vine, not within a cardboard box. Unfortunately, economics dictates that to maximize profits produce should be picked before they get fully ripe. Unripe produce is firmer, and therefore won't bruise as easily during the handling and transportation process. Even "vine-ripened" tomatoes are picked when they are still pink, before they turn ripe red.

Buy produce that is in season. It will be fresher and tastier. Cheaper, too. See peak times for each particular vegetable in the [Specific Fruits and Vegetables appendix](#).

Once bought, get vegetables home from the store and into the refrigerator as soon as possible, as some nutrients are destroyed quickly if left sitting at room temperature or in a hot trunk.

Be gentle with your produce.

Some vegetables and fruits look a lot tougher than they are. For example, pineapples look like they have tough skin, but it is actually very vulnerable to bruising. Damaging the skin of vegetables and fruits leaves them open to decay, which sometimes spreads very rapidly throughout the rest of the flesh. So be gentle with your produce, and treat it with tender, loving care.

Keep vegetables cold.

Chemicals called enzymes cause a loss of nutrients and change the composition of vegetables, so that they rot. They convert sugar into starch so that, as time in storage passes, vegetables lose flavor and crispness. Have you ever tasted a pea picked fresh from the garden? It's actually sweet! Older peas are bland, tasteless, and all starch. Enzymes have converted virtually all their sugar. Cold temperatures slow down this enzyme activity.

Store most vegetables in high humidity.

Circulating refrigerator air is very dry. Protect vegetables from this dry air by placing them in plastic bags or in the vegetable crisper drawer of your refrigerator. Vegetables actually contain a lot of water (as human bodies do), and if this water dries up, nutrients get destroyed and taste is adversely affected. So keep your carrots from shriveling by leaving them in the plastic bag.

Some vegetables require a cool, dark, dry place.

Some vegetables, such as pumpkins and potatoes, store well for months in a dry, dark, cool (about 45 to 50 Fahrenheit) place. If you don't think you have such a place, are you sure you thought of your attic (in winter, not summer when it gets very hot), or a dark corner of your unheated garage, or even your basement (if it is not a damp basement)? A small thermometer can be used to monitor the temperature.

Freezing is the best storage method for COOKED vegetables.

Super Baby Food vegetables are most nutritious when cooked properly and eaten immediately. If this isn't possible, vegetables should be stored in a way that maintains the most taste and nutrients. Freezing is the best storage method, and is, of course, also the most expensive method. Canning (or jarring) is popular because it's cheap, but most canned food is not nearly as tasty or nutritious as frozen. Drying is another method to preserve food. See the chapter on Drying Foods for how to dry your own fruits and vegetables.

How to Clean Vegetables (and Fruits)

How to clean vegetables and fruits leaves me in a quandary. On one hand, I want to really soak and scrub them to remove as many chemicals as possible (on foods not grown organically) before they get into my little one's mouth. But on the other hand, the more I

soak and scrub, the more nutrients get destroyed, especially the water-soluble vitamins. Personally, I'm more afraid of pesticides than vitamin-depletion, so I recommend lots of washing.

To Peel or Not to Peel

Whether or not you peel off the skin depends on the particular vegetable or fruit. See the specifics in the appendix. For example, see "Preparing [carrots](#) for cooking: " in the Specific Fruits and Vegetables appendix. It says that you can or cannot peel carrots, depending on their size. Keep in mind that a lot of the nutrients are in the skins, and scraping will cause them to be lost. Instead of spending time peeling carrots, I carefully scrub off the dirt with a vegetable brush. You may choose to peel instead, especially if the carrots are not organic and you are concerned about pesticides.

WARNING: Avoid eating large amounts of orange peels or peels of other citrus fruits, as they may contain small amounts of carcinogens (cancer-causing substances).

Use Water and Soap.

Always use lots of water to clean vegetables and fruits. It used to be that experts recommended cold water, because warm water may soften them. Also, warm water may cause a significant loss of nutrients and even the loss of some juice. However, the FDA (Food and Drug Administration) now recommends that you use warm water to clean veggies and fruits. It will do a better job removing the pesticides. Even on organically grown produce, use warm water. Organically grown foods have a higher risk of bacterial contamination from the natural organic fertilizers (manure) that are used.

I recommend the use of one of the soaps specifically made to clean vegetables and fruits. You can probably find them at your local natural food store. If not, ask if they can order it for you.

WARNING: Make sure you use only soap that is meant to be used on food. Other soaps may leave a dangerous residue on food that will end up in your baby's tummy.

If you have vegetable/fruit soap: Spray each fruit/vegetable piece all over, covering every inch. Then let sit for at least 30 seconds. Or, follow the label directions.

Now take a vegetable brush and hold a piece under the water while gently scrubbing. For hard vegetables like unpeeled carrots, which have little crevices where dirt collects, move the brush up and down and side to side (as in brushing your teeth).

Wash All Produce

You may not be in the habit of washing fruits with thick peels that will not be eaten, such as bananas and oranges. But these have pesticides all over them and people have been

touching them. So please don't forget to wash any fruit or vegetable that you will be giving your baby.

MONEY SAVER: Let your soapy water do double duty. Save soap and water by collecting the running tap water in the sink while you are washing. Use the second-hand water to wash fruits with peels that won't be eaten, like bananas and oranges.

If you're not going to cook the washed vegetables immediately, shake and lightly dry each piece with a towel and return them to the refrigerator as quickly as you can. Too much moisture may cause them to spoil. If you're going to cook them now, there's no need to dry them.

How to Cook Vegetables

When cooking baby food, your main concern besides safety should be that of nutrition. Negligent cooking techniques can destroy important vitamins needed for your baby's good health. Keep in mind that nutrients are destroyed by heat, air, light, and water. Water-soluble (The chapter Nutrition 101: A Crash Course in Nutrition defines water-soluble vitamins.) vitamins are lost when they leach into cooking water. Some vitamins are destroyed by the heat inevitable in cooking. Vitamin C is the most vulnerable vitamin, being both water-soluble and extremely susceptible to heat. Nature knew what she was doing when she put vitamin C into foods we eat raw, like citrus fruits.

Tips for Minimizing Nutrient Loss from Vegetables During Preparation and Cooking

- Remember that nutrients are destroyed by heat, light, air, and water.
- Most vegetables need to be kept cold to retain their nutrients and stay fresh. Don't let them sit on the counter at room temperature; get them into the refrigerator as quickly as possible.
- Don't peel a vegetable or fruit if you don't have to. The peel contains concentrated nutrients and fiber. See warning about citrus fruit peels on page 13.
- Cut vegetables into the largest pieces possible. Cutting, chopping, dicing, and shredding cause nutrient loss due to exposure to air and warmth through the increased surface area. Make the pieces as uniformly sized as possible, so that each piece will take the same amount of time to cook. If you're cooking whole vegetables, such as potatoes, choose same-sized vegetables at the supermarket so that they will take the same amount of time to cook.
- Use as little water as possible during cooking. Water-soluble vitamins, such as vitamin C and the B-complex, leach into cooking water. Steam cook vegetables instead of boiling them. When steam cooking veggies, make sure that the bottom of the steamer is not submerged in the water, allowing water to touch the cooking vegetables. The steamer should be at least an inch or two above the boiling water. Keep the lid tightly closed to minimize the amount of steam that escapes. When

steam goes, it takes nutrients with it. In microwave cooking, use little or no cooking water. Most vegetables need only 1 or 2 tablespoons of added water to microwave cook. Vegetables with high water content need no added water. See instructions for each particular vegetable in the appendix [Specific Fruits and Vegetables](#).

- If you insist on boiling vegetables, simmer instead of boil as much as possible.
 - Don't use baking soda in cooking water, it destroys water-soluble vitamins.
 - Don't keep food warm--serve it right away. And don't leave leftovers at room temperature--refrigerate immediately.
 - Riboflavin, a B vitamin, is destroyed by light. Buy milk that is in opaque cartons rather than the transparent plastic or glass containers that let light shine in.
 - Light and warmth destroy vitamin C very quickly. Keep orange juice in a cold and dark place. Buy orange juice in opaque cartons in the refrigerator section of the supermarket. Or better yet, give your baby vitamin C by feeding him a fresh kiwi fruit or by squeezing him juice from a fresh orange.
 - When pureeing vegetables, use the cooking water or the water over which the vegetables were steamed. It contains valuable nutrients that leached out of the vegetables during cooking.
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Because vegetables for baby are just plain, unseasoned, whole vegetables with no fancy sauces or flavoring, cooking for baby is easy. It involves very little preparation and consists mostly of waiting while the vegetables cook. You just have to keep an eye on them while you do the rest of your kitchen chores.

How to Tell When a Vegetable is Done Cooking

Cooking vegetables is a matter of timing. Vegetable cooking times vary due to moisture content, freshness, size, density, and age of the vegetable. The uniqueness of your stove and oven add to cooking time variability. Information on cooking times for specific vegetables can be found in the Specific Fruits and Vegetables appendix. Please take a moment and turn to the information on [carrots](#). Note that times for microwaving, steaming, and baking are stated. Use my recommended times as approximates and depend on your experience with your cooking equipment.

A minimum amount of cooking time retains maximum nutrients, so test as soon as you think the vegetables might be done. You can always add cooking time if undercooked, but there is nothing you can do if they are overcooked. Test most vegetables for doneness by piercing them with a fork. The fork should slide in fairly easily. Whole vegetables, such as sweet potatoes and beets, should be soft all the way to the center. Leafy vegetables, such as spinach and kale, should be crisp tender to bite, look wilted, and take on a brighter color. (Crisp tender means that the greens are tender, but not so mushy that they don't crunch a little when you bite them.)

TIP: For future reference, make notes in this book on how much time it took to cook a particular vegetable. Add any other relevant details. I always write notes in my cookbooks, including specifics about my equipment, mistakes I don't want to repeat, and whether or not my family and I liked the finished product.

Methods of Cooking Vegetables

There are many ways you can cook vegetables: steaming, microwaving, baking, boiling, pressure-cooking, stir-frying, grilling, deep-frying, and, of course, not cooking them at all--eating them raw. Water and/or heat destroy vitamins; therefore, the best methods of cooking vegetables for your baby are those that have a minimum cooking time and use the least heat and water. Microwaving, steaming, and baking are best. Microwaving is excellent for nutrient preservation because it uses very little water and short cooking times. Steaming and baking are good because they use little water. Boiling vegetables in water causes a considerable loss of water-soluble vitamins. If you absolutely must boil, use as little water as possible: no more than inch in the bottom of the pot. Have the water boiling before you add the vegetables and simmer for as little time as possible. Deep-frying vegetables, such as potatoes (French fries), should not even be considered. (See recipe for [French Fries-Not!](#))

Interestingly, eating vegetables raw is not always the way to get the most nutrients. Some nutrients become more available after cooking, such as the vitamin A in carrots.

Microwave Cooking

Microwave-safe containers. It is important to cook in microwave-safe containers. Glass and wood are usually safe in the microwave. Don't use any container with metal or put aluminum foil in the microwave (unless you're knowledgeable about shielding). Microwaves can't pass through metal. Containers with metal include dishes with gold or silver decorative paint. Many a time I've accidentally used a gold-banded plate and the sparks made me jump. Plastic is probably safe if it's dishwasher safe. If you're not sure about a plastic container, test it this way: Fill it with a cup of water and microwave on high for a minute or two. If the water feels hot and the plastic does not, it is probably safe. If the plastic feels warm, it is not safe in the microwave and will melt at high temperatures. If you cannot fill a plastic dish with water to test it because it is too flat, don't heat it empty in the microwave alone. Place it in the microwave along with a cup with water. Then heat both for a minute or two on high and feel the plastic to see if it's hot.

Standing time. Contrary to what you may think, microwaves do not cook "from the inside out" or "from within." In fact, microwaves penetrate at most 1 inches of most foods. The microwaves cause the food molecules to vibrate, generating heat, which cooks the food. After the microwaves stop, the food continues to vibrate and cook. For this reason, food should be slightly undercooked. It is important to let the food stand for a short period of time after the microwave turns off. This standing time allows the food to finish cooking.

Read the instructions in the appendix [Specific Fruits and Vegetables](#) for the cooking and standing times for each particular vegetable. General rules for microwaving fresh vegetables are next.

Microwaving Fresh Vegetables

Microwave vegetables on high.

Use as little water as possible when cooking vegetables. Water leaches some nutrients out of the vegetables and requires more cooking time.

Shallow dishes are better for microwaving than deep dishes.

If possible, use a turntable to cook food evenly. If your microwave doesn't have a built-in turntable, you can buy a separate turntable to place on the floor of your microwave. If you don't use a turntable, turn the food frequently and stir often to promote even cooking.

Cooking times will vary according to the size, moisture content, freshness, and age of the vegetable and the wattage of your microwave oven. Cook for the shortest time possible and let stand. If you overcook the food, there's nothing you can do, but you can always add cooking time. Test for doneness by piercing with a fork. If not done, cook for one additional minute and test again. Repeat for one-minute increments if necessary. Make notes in your cookbook to save testing next time.

Microwave most vegetables in a covered container that will hold in the steam. Use the cover that came with the container. If you don't have a cover, use the heavy-duty plastic wrap made for microwave cooking so that it doesn't melt into the food. Leave one corner open by turning the plastic wrap up. This "vent" will let steam escape and prevent an explosion. Be very careful when removing wrap so that you don't burn yourself. Open the end of the container farthest away from you in case steam shoots out.

Some vegetables, such as potatoes, squash, corn on the cob, and sweet potatoes, can be cooked on the floor of the microwave oven with no container. (See instructions for a particular vegetable in the appendix [Specific Fruits and Vegetables](#).) Place at least two layers of paper toweling under them. Use only white paper towels--you don't need color seeping into your vegetables. Don't waste paper towels; if you're cooking one potato, use one paper towel folded in half to get two layers of toweling--not two whole flat paper towels. After cooking, you can use the same towels to wipe out the microwave.

If you're cooking whole potatoes, beets, Brussels sprouts, eggplant, squash, tomatoes, or any other whole vegetable contained in a peel, pierce the peel several places with the tines of a fork. This will allow steam to escape during cooking and prevent explosions. Same goes for tofu dogs (and remember that hot dogs are not Super Baby Food).

Always place the widest end of the food toward the outside of the oven and the smallest end toward the center. For example, arrange asparagus spears in the shape of wagon-

wheel spokes with asparagus tips (small end) pointing toward the center of oven and bottom stalks (wide end) pointing toward microwave walls. Same goes for corn on the cob and whole potatoes. Remember that foods cook in the microwave from "out to in," so place the larger and more dense food parts toward the outer edges of the microwave.

Microwave cooking requires less liquid than conventional. To adapt your favorite recipes from conventional oven to the microwave, reduce the liquid ingredients to 75% of the amount called for in the original recipe. For example, if the recipe calls for 1 cup of water, reduce the amount to 3/4 cup. Remember that steam is better retained in microwave cooking; therefore, covered dishes cook faster in the microwave. Subtract cooking time from your original recipes, and remember it's better to undercook than overcook--you can always add cooking time.

WARNING: There's always the danger of a child accidentally starting an empty microwave oven. Always keep a cup of water or a box of baking soda in the microwave when not in use.

TIP: Never use abrasive cleansers or scouring pads in your microwave oven. An easy way to remove dried foods from the walls of your microwave is to boil water in it for at least 5 minutes. The steam will soften the dried foods, which will then wipe away easily with a soft damp cloth or sponge. Even easier: Wipe up spills immediately after they happen, before they dry and harden!

Steaming Method

If you don't have a steamer, buy one--it's worth it. My first steamer was like the one on the left below, one of the least expensive ones--about \$5.00. I finally graduated to the top-of-the-line multi-level type on the right with a clear cover and matching steamer insert with heatproof handles.

There are many other types of steamers. I never did experience the bamboo steamer. Invest in a good steamer if you can afford it. If you don't want to purchase a special steamer, you can always improvise a steamer by inserting a metal colander, wire basket, strainer, or some similar heat-safe kitchen container with holes into a pot big enough to wholly contain it.

How to Steam Fresh Vegetables

- Vegetables should be placed into the steamer so that they are no more than 2 inches deep.
- Place them so that they are all at an even layer--don't have a big pile next to a small pile.
- If you are steaming whole vegetables, such as Brussels sprouts, place them in a single layer. Don't pile them up like a bucket of balls.

- To steam vegetables, place an inch or so of water into the bottom of a pot. The vegetables should be at least one inch above the water so that the water won't touch the vegetables when it is vigorously boiling.
- Bring the water to a full boil BEFORE placing the vegetables in the steamer into the pot.
- If the water starts to boil out, add more boiling water.
- Make sure the cover fits well on the pot to minimize the escape of steam into the air. Steam takes nutrients with it.

TIP: The time it takes to steam vegetables is usually a few minutes longer than if you boiled them. So add a few minutes to the boiling time necessary to cook vegetables.

Baking Method

Baking or roasting fresh vegetables preserves nutrients because little or no water is used. Some vegetables, such as sweet potatoes, can be baked whole. Simply pierce their skins and place directly on the oven rack or on a baking sheet. Some vegetables should be sliced and placed in a pan with a little water. For sliced vegetables, pack them tight into covered baking dishes to retain moisture. Vegetables with high water content, such as zucchini, need no added water. Check the appendix [Specific Fruits and Vegetables](#).

MONEY SAVER: To save on energy bills, place a batch of vegetables in the same half-empty (conventional) oven you are using to cook dinner. Unfortunately, the same energy-saving method cannot be used with a microwave oven. When you put an additional food item into the microwave oven, you must add significant cooking time. In a conventional oven, you may have to add only a few minutes.

The Hybrid Cooking Method

You can partially cook food or thaw frozen food in the microwave oven and then finish cooking it in a conventional oven. Let's say you're going to use your conventional oven to bake a single cake. You can place 4 sweet potatoes in the microwave and partially cook them for 10 minutes. (See page 42 for full instructions on how to microwave potatoes.) While the potatoes are in the microwave, pre-heat your conventional oven and mix your batter. Then put the cake and partially cooked sweet potatoes in the oven together. In the 30 minutes that the cake needs to bake, you can simultaneously finish cooking the sweet potatoes.

Once you become aware of energy efficiency, a half empty oven will drive you crazy--keep potatoes and other foods on hand to cook when extra oven space is available. Freeze them for later eating.

How to Puree Vegetables

Your young baby cannot yet chew food, so you must puree it to a smooth lumpless consistency. To get this liquidy consistency necessary for beginning eaters, water must be added to the food mixture being processed. For most vegetables, use the water they were cooked in, whether the water is from steaming, microwaving, baking, or boiling. This water contains valuable nutrients that have leached out of the vegetables during cooking.

Pour the water from the cooking pot into a container with a spout so that it will be easy to pour into the processor. I use a little glass measuring cup with a spout.

I will use the term "processor" to refer to your blender, your food processor, your food mill, or whatever you're using to puree.

Place chunks of cooked vegetables into the bowl of the processor so that it's almost full. Make sure you leave some head room. Add a tablespoon or two of the cooking water. Cover and start the processor. Pour more water very slowly through the hole in the top of the processor until the food moves freely. If you're using a blender, use a wooden spoon or rubber spatula to push the food into the blades, if necessary. Use the least amount of water you can to get the consistency you need for your baby's age. For a very young baby who has just started on solid food, you must use quite a bit of water to get a very smooth texture.

MONEY SAVER: Do you see how much water you must add to get this fine consistency? Makes you wonder how much commercial jarred baby food is actually food and how much is water.

As your baby gets older, she can chew or actually "gum" chunkier food, for which you will, of course, add less water and puree for less time.

If you accidentally added too much water, just add some more cooked vegetables.

TIP: Next time you're at the supermarket, take a close look at the glass jars of baby food and note their consistencies. Copy their textures when making food for your baby at different ages.

TIP: When it comes time that your baby can eat chunky vegetables, fill your food processor only halfway. This will prevent some food from getting over-chopped.

As soon as you have finished pureeing the vegetables, store them immediately in the refrigerator or freezer.

WARNING: You must be especially careful to keep any pureed baby food cold. Never leave it for extended periods at room temperature, because bacteria will thrive in it. The same is true for open jars of commercial baby food. Remember that bacteria grow in temperatures that are not too hot and not too cold--they love room temperature.

How to Safely Store Cooked Vegetables

Refrigerating Small Portions

Store a portion or two of the food you just pureed in the refrigerator to feed to your baby within the next.....