

Peeling back the layers

Are onions OK for pregnant moms and babies? An infant nutrition expert weighs in

Xandra Anderson, a certified lactation consultant at OSF HealthCare, hears the question from moms-to-be all the time: Is [insert food here] OK for me and my baby?

On today's menu: Onions. Can they be a welcome addition to a baby's diet? Yes, Anderson says, if you know how to introduce the food properly.

"Have you ever tasted baby food? It's not great!" Anderson says with a chuckle, reiterating the importance of safely branching out with a child's diet. "So, I encourage families to give their babies flavor. Watch levels of salt and sugar, but there's nothing wrong with food that tastes good."

For mom

Anderson says it's no problem for pregnant women to have onions in their diet.

"They are very rich in antioxidants. That's something we don't get a lot of. They're really high in vitamin C," Anderson says. "They have fiber, magnesium and potassium. Fiber and magnesium help with digestion, and magnesium helps with cramps. Potassium is really good for blood circulation and blood pressure."

But, there are the usual precautions. When adding raw onions to a meal (a salad, for example), wash them to remove any bacteria. And don't overindulge. For example, don't have a greasy, processed cheeseburger as an excuse to get your daily onion intake.

"Onions are a high FODMAP food, which means there are carbohydrates that are harder for some people to digest," Anderson adds, noting that a woman's digestive system changes a lot when carrying a baby. "So if you have a sensitive digestive system, onions could cause bloating. If you have irritable bowel syndrome, onions can make that flare up. Cooking onions helps break down some of those carbohydrates and aids digestion."

For baby

Infants should consume breastmilk or formula exclusively for at least the first six months, Anderson reminds. But after that, introducing onions is like introducing any other food: Slow and steady wins the race.

One option: Sauté some onions to soften them, cut the food into small pieces to prevent choking then work the onions into the store-bought baby food.

"Make it easy for baby to chew. They've never had to do that before," Anderson points out. "It's good to let them learn how to chew, but we need to make sure the foods are easy to chew."

"Onions help develop a baby's palette," Anderson adds of the benefits of the vegetable. "Experts are finding that introducing strong flavors like that can prevent picky eating in the future."

Precautions and warning signs to know: If the baby is extra fussy or gassy or has an allergic reaction like a rash or diarrhea, take the onions out of the diet and see if that improves things. See a health care provider if symptoms don't improve.

Myth vs. fact

Do a web search for “babies and onions,” and you’ll find a lot of claims.

- Can onions help with colic, a condition where a healthy baby cries for a long time? Not so fast, Anderson says. In fact, onion-induced gassiness could make the baby even more fussy.
- Some say putting an onion in my baby’s crib or sock or giving them onion water can help with baby’s health.

“It’s supposed to draw out toxins,” Anderson says, repeating what she calls an “old wives’ tale.”

But, Anderson says science doesn’t back the claims up. In fact, onions can irritate a child’s skin and eyes.

- Can eating onions help with teething, when the baby’s teeth emerge? There’s actually some truth to this one, Anderson says. To try it, skip other types and focus on green onions. Let the food cool in the refrigerator before giving it to the little one.

“It’s teaching them to bring things to their mouth and chew. It’s a food that’s cool and not super hard. As they chew, it will break down. But it’s not going to disintegrate in the mouth,” Anderson says.

All this can help with pain and inflammation, Anderson says. Just watch your youngster at all times while chewing.

Learn more

Read more about how to have a successful pregnancy and birth on the [OSF HealthCare website](#). The health system or social service agency near you may also offer classes to master baby feeding.