

Breastfeeding - deciding when to stop

Stopping breastfeeding is called weaning. It is up to you and your baby to decide when the time is right. The World Health Organization recommends that all babies be exclusively breastfed for six months, then gradually introduced to appropriate family foods after six months while continuing to breastfeed for two years or beyond.

Some babies decrease the number of breastfeeds as they begin to be able to digest solid food. The first foods are really tastes and not much is digested or able to be used by the baby. It is often not until nine to 12 months or later that babies are able to actually ingest (swallow) and use the solid foods that they eat.

Breastmilk in the first year

Breastmilk contains all the nourishment needed to promote normal healthy growth and development in babies in their first six months of life and remains the most important food during their first year. Babies weaned from breastmilk prior to their first birthday will need to be given infant formula. Please consult your maternal and child health nurse for further information on this.

Infant formulas are generally not necessary after the first 12 months, as your child should be then receiving a large range of family foods including dairy products.

Breastfeeding benefits

Breastfeeding even for a short time is beneficial. In the first few days after your baby's birth, your breasts produce colostrum. This rich substance contains vital ingredients, including immunoglobulin or cells that help build your baby's immune system. There is ample evidence that babies who are breastfed for the first six months of life do not suffer from as many (or as severe) episodes of common childhood illnesses. These include gastroenteritis, respiratory illnesses and middle ear infections.

Stopping breastfeeding early

Sometimes, weaning needs to happen earlier or more quickly than planned. It is normal for a mother to feel sad when she weans, especially if it is earlier than expected. A mother may feel she has no choice but to wean – however, most breastfeeding difficulties can be overcome with help. An Australian Breastfeeding Association counsellor, lactation consultant or maternal and child health nurse can offer you information and support.

Returning to the paid workforce need not mean having to wean. Many women combine breastfeeding with part or full-time work, study and other commitments.

Take your time to wean your baby

Depending on your baby's age and need for sucking, you can wean either to a cup or bottle. If you decide on a bottle, eventually your baby will need to be weaned from that. Start with whichever breastfeed of the day your baby seems least interested in. Then cut out another breastfeed every few days or even each week, depending on your comfort and your baby's willingness to cooperate.

The concentration of antibodies to bacterial and viral diseases is increased as weaning progresses and milk supply reduces. This ensures that your baby is protected as they are being introduced to new foods and exploring new surroundings.

Slowly reducing the number of breastfeeds protects your baby during the weaning period. Remember to give your baby plenty of cuddles during the weaning process so that you and your baby still have plenty of close time together.

Weaning your baby slowly will also help you avoid problems such as mastitis. If you need to wean your baby quickly, talk to a healthcare professional or a lactation consultant about caring for your breasts.

When to introduce solid foods

Breastmilk or infant formula should be your baby's main source of nutrition for around the first year of life. Health professionals recommend exclusive breastfeeding for six months, with a gradual introduction of appropriate family foods in the second six months and ongoing breastfeeding for two years or beyond.

Babies show they are ready to start solids when they start:

- Showing interest when others are eating
- Making gestures that seem to say 'feed me too'
- Disappearance of the tongue-thrust reflex (which causes them to push out any food put in their mouth)
- Being able to hold their head up and sit without support.

Talk to your maternal and child health nurse about your baby's readiness to eat.

Iron requirements

A baby born at full term has a store of iron passed on from the mother during pregnancy. You may be concerned about your baby's store of iron running low at around six months of age. Breastmilk contains small amounts of readily absorbed iron, and recent studies have shown that the risk of iron deficiency is very low in full-term healthy breastfed babies who continue to breastfeed past six months as solids are introduced.

Breastfeeding while pregnant

If you become pregnant, you may choose to continue to breastfeed or you may like to gradually wean your baby. This is an individual choice. Whether or not you choose to continue breastfeeding, it is important to maintain a healthy diet. Seek advice from your health professional or the Australian Breastfeeding Association.

Extended breastfeeding

Some mothers and babies enjoy breastfeeding so much they are in no hurry to stop. Family members and friends may feel uncomfortable about it, but don't give in to pressure if you and your child are happy. It is not unusual for children up to four years of age to continue to be breastfed.

It can be helpful to have information to give your family and friends about why you have decided to keep breastfeeding. This may include information about the continued health benefits, security and comfort for your child.

The child who refuses to be weaned

You may be ready to cease breastfeeding, but your child may resist all your attempts to do so. Your approach will depend on your child's age. There are many strategies for weaning a baby.

If your child can talk and understand well, talk with them about your breastfeeding. Explain that you are going to stop and introduce other ways that you can enjoy being close together. You could seek professional advice about weaning or difficulties associated with weaning.

Where to get help

- Australian Breastfeeding Association Breastfeeding Helpline Tel. 1800 mum 2 mum (686 2 686)
- A lactation consultant – contact the Lactation Consultants of Australia and New Zealand
- Maternal and child health nurse
- The Maternal Child Health Line is available 24 hours a day Tel. 132 229

- Your doctor.

Things to remember

- It is up to you and your baby to decide when the time is right to stop breastfeeding.
- Aim to breastfeed for six months, then gradually introduce appropriate family foods in the second six months while continuing to breastfeed.
- Breastfeeding even for a short time is beneficial.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Australian Breastfeeding Association

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