

Weaning From Breastfeeding

Weaning is a gradual process when a baby transitions from breast milk to other sources of nourishment. When to wean is a personal decision. Moms may choose to wean due to another pregnancy, a return to work, her health or the baby's, or simply a feeling that it's time.

When to wean

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends feeding babies only breast milk for the first six months of life. After that, the AAP recommends that a combination of solid foods and breast milk be given until a baby is at least 1 year old.

Experts say after the first birthday is the best time to begin weaning because kids are more adaptable to change at that age. Weaning does not have to be all-or-nothing. Some women choose to wean during the day and breastfeed at night, depending on their work situation and their schedules. Some children wean themselves earlier than the mother had intended, and some babies are resistant to weaning when the mother is ready.

Weaning is easier if a child has also taken milk from another source. Try giving an occasional bottle of breast milk to your baby once breastfeeding is well-established — even if you plan to continue breastfeeding, because this can facilitate weaning later.

If you decide to wean before your child is 1 year old or you find that you're not making enough milk, you will need to give her an iron-fortified formula. If she is near her first birthday, consider placing formula in a cup instead of a bottle.

Although some kids are content to nurse indefinitely and will wait for their mothers to initiate weaning, others will give clues that they're ready to wean. They may express indifference or crankiness when nursed or may nurse in shorter sessions than they did before.

How to wean

To allow both mom and baby to adjust physically and emotionally to the change, weaning should be a gradual process.

One approach is to drop one feeding session a week until the child is taking all of her feeds from a bottle or cup. If you plan to continue to give pumped breast milk, you will need to pump in order to keep up your milk supply. If you are weaning your child off breast milk, gradually dropping feeds can help avoid engorgement. Start by eliminating the midday feeding because it's usually the smallest and most inconvenient — especially for working moms. Many mothers let go of the bedtime feeding last because it remains a special part of the bonding experience.

Another approach is to leave the decision of when to wean completely up to the child. Once they're eating three meals of solid food a day (plus snacks in between), kids often breastfeed less and less. In this situation, you may find that your milk will dry up from lack of demand, and pumping may be necessary if you want to keep the milk flowing.

If your child is breastfeeding less, make sure she is getting enough formula or milk; ask your doctor.

Easing the transition

- Engage your child in a fun play activity or go on an outing during times when you would usually nurse.
- Avoid sitting in your usual nursing spots or wearing your usual nursing clothes.
- Delay weaning if your child is trying to adapt to some other change. Trying to wean when she is just beginning child care or during teething might not be a good idea.
- If your baby is younger than 1 year, try to introduce a bottle or cup when you would typically be nursing. For an older child, try a healthy snack, offering a cup or maybe even just a cuddle.
- Try changing your daily routine so that you're otherwise engaged during breastfeeding times.
- Enlist your partner's help to provide a distraction at a typical nursing time.
- If your child begins to pick up a comforting habit such as thumb sucking or becomes attached to a security blanket, don't discourage it. She may be trying to adjust to the emotional changes of weaning.

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