

Weaning:

When and how to stop breastfeeding CHECKLIST



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What is weaning?

The term usually refers to when your baby stops breastfeeding.

Lots of Mums worry that weaning signals the end of the intimate bond you and your child have created through breastfeeding but that's not true. It just means you're nourishing and nurturing your little one in different ways.

For example, if you often breastfed your child for comfort, you'll now will find other ways to make them feel better. Read a book, sing a song together, offer them a toy or a drink of water. It's about your intention to help your child find another way to feel soothed other than through your breast. Some people offer a dummy.

If you feel confident and relaxed in your decision to wean your child, then they pick up that you 'mean business' and they react to your confidence. If you are unsure, hesitant or feeling guilty then your little one will sense that & protest & sense your indecision. Try to stay calm and be firm. If you need to, hand them to your partner for a cuddle.

Don't rush your decision – wait until you feel ready & it will be easier.

When should I start weaning?

You're the best judge of when it's time to wean, and you don't have to set a deadline until you and your child are ready. The World Health Organisation and the National Health recommend exclusive breastfeeding (i.e. no other fluids or solids) for six months and then continued breastfeeding combined with solid foods for 12-24 months or as long as mum and baby desire.

Despite what friends, relatives, or even strangers may say, there's no right or wrong way to wean. You can choose a time that feels right to you, or let your child wean naturally when they're older.

Baby-led weaning:

Weaning is easiest when your child begins to lose interest in breastfeeding, and that can happen any time after they start eating solids (around 4 to 6 months). Some babies are more interested in solid food than breast milk by 12 months, after they've tried a variety of foods and can drink from a cup.

Toddlers may become less interested in breastfeeding when they grow more active and aren't inclined to sit still long enough to breastfeed. If your child is fussy and impatient while nursing or is easily distracted, they may be giving you signs that they are ready.

When to start introducing solid foods

Introducing your baby to solid foods – can start when your baby is around four to six months old.

It's a really important step in their development, and it can be great fun to explore new flavours and textures together.

To begin with, how much your baby takes is less important than getting them used to the idea of eating. They will still be getting most of their nutrition from breast milk or infant formula.

Babies don't need three meals a day to start with, so you can begin by offering foods at a time that suits you both.

Gradually, you'll be able to increase the amount and variety of food your baby eats, until they can eventually eat the same as the rest of the family, in smaller portions.

Why it pays to wait until they're ready

Research shows babies can get all the nutrients they need from breast milk or infant formula until they are around six months old. Waiting till then gives their digestive system time to develop fully so it can cope with solid foods. This includes solid foods made into purées and cereals added to milk.

If you are breastfeeding, having breast milk alone up to the age of six months will protect your baby against infections. Breast milk will carry on protecting them from infections for as long as you carry on feeding.

Whether your baby has breast milk or infant formula, waiting until they are ready for food will save a lot of time, too. They'll quickly be able to feed themselves and with less mess, as they will be able to swallow properly.

Three signs your baby is ready for their first food

Every baby is an individual, but there are three clear signs that, together, show your baby is ready for solid foods alongside breast milk or formula. It's very rare for these signs to appear together before your baby is six months old.

1. They can stay in a sitting position and hold their head steady.
2. They can co-ordinate their eyes, hands and mouth so they can look at the food, pick it up and put it in their mouth, all by themselves.
3. They can swallow food. Babies who are not ready will push their food back out with their tongue, so they get more round their face than they do in their mouths.

Some signs that can be mistaken for a baby being ready for solid foods:

- chewing fists
- waking in the night when they have previously slept through
- wanting extra milk feeds

These are normal behaviours and not necessarily a sign of hunger or being ready to *start solid food*. *Starting solid foods won't make them any more likely to sleep through the night*. Extra feeds are usually enough until they're ready for other food.

Getting started with solid foods

- Always stay with your baby when they are eating in case they start to choke. Find out how to help a choking child by going to – ‘What to do if a Baby is Choking’ by First Aid For Life <https://firstaidforlife.org.uk/baby-choking/>
- Let your baby enjoy touching and holding the food.
- Allow your baby to feed themselves, using their fingers, as soon as they show an interest.
- Don't force your baby to eat – wait until the next time if they're not interested this time.
- If you're using a spoon, wait for your baby to open their mouth before you offer the food. Your baby may like to hold a spoon, too.
- Start by offering just a few pieces or teaspoons of food, once a day.
- Cool hot food and test it before giving it to your baby.
- Don't add salt, sugar or stock cubes to your baby's food or cooking water. See what other foods to avoid giving your baby.

What foods to give your baby as they grow

Feeding your baby from 0-6 months

Your baby only needs breast milk or first infant formula. "Follow-on" formula isn't suitable for babies under six months, and you don't need to introduce it after six months either.

Check with your health visitor or GP first if you want to introduce solid foods before six months.

Babies and food allergies

While variety in your baby's diet is really important, there is a chance they may be allergic to certain foods. That's why it's important to introduce cows' milk, eggs, wheat, gluten, nuts, peanuts, peanut products, seeds, fish and shellfish one at a time and not before six months.

There is no evidence that waiting until your child is older will prevent them developing a food allergy. Once your baby is ready for solids, give them these foods in very small amounts and watch carefully for any symptoms of an allergic reaction.

If your baby already has a known allergy, such as a diagnosed food allergy or eczema, or you have a family history of food allergies, eczema, asthma or hay fever, you may need to be particularly careful when introducing peanuts and peanut products. Talk to your GP or health visitor first. Remember, peanuts, like all nuts, should be crushed or ground.

Baby food from 6 months

First foods

Your baby's first foods can include mashed or soft cooked fruit and vegetables like parsnip, potato, yam, sweet potato, carrot, apple or pear, all cooled before eating. Soft fruits like peach or melon, or baby rice or baby cereal mixed with your baby's usual milk, are good as well.

Keep feeding your baby breast milk or infant formula, too, but don't give them whole cows' milk as a drink until they are one year old.

Finger foods

Finger food is food that is cut up into pieces big enough for your baby to hold in their fist with a bit sticking out. Pieces about the size of your own finger work well. Your baby learns to chew this way. Try grabbable bits of soft, ripe banana or avocado.

Next foods

Once your baby is used to the foods above, they can have soft cooked meat such as chicken, mashed fish (check very carefully for any bones), pasta, noodles, toast, pieces of chapatti, lentils, rice and mashed hard-boiled eggs. They can also have full-fat dairy products such as yoghurt, fromage frais or custard. Choose products with no added sugar or less sugar. Whole cows' milk can be used in cooking or mixed with food from six months.

Cups

Introduce a cup from around six months and offer sips of water with meals. Using an open cup or a free-flow cup without a valve will help your baby learn to sip and is better for their teeth.

Vitamins

The Department of Health recommends that all under-fives are given vitamin supplements containing vitamins A, C and D every day.

Babies who are having more than 500ml (about a pint) of infant formula a day shouldn't be given vitamin supplements because formula is already fortified with nutrients.

Feeding your baby from 8-9 months

Your baby will gradually move towards eating three meals a day. It will be a mixture of soft finger foods, and mashed or chopped foods.

Your baby's diet should consist of a variety of the following: fruit and vegetables; bread, rice, pasta, potatoes and other starchy foods; meat, fish, eggs, beans and other non-dairy sources of protein; and milk and dairy products.

Your baby's food from 12 months

Your baby will now be eating three meals a day, chopped if necessary, plus breast milk or whole cows' milk and healthier snacks like fruit, vegetable sticks, toast and rice cakes.

They can now drink whole cows' milk. Choose full-fat dairy products as children under two need the extra fat and vitamins found in them. From two years old, if they are a good eater and growing well, they can have semi-skimmed milk. From five years old, 1% fat and skimmed milk is OK.

You can give your baby:

- three to four servings a day of starchy food such as potatoes, bread and rice
- three to four servings a day of fruit and vegetables
- two servings a day of meat, fish, eggs, dhal or other pulses (beans and lentils)

What milk, when?

For around the first six months you should feed your baby only breast milk or infant formula. Infant formula made from cows' or goats' milk is the only suitable alternative to breast milk in the first 12 months of your baby's life. Only use soya-based infant formula if your GP has advised you to. Follow-on milks are available for babies over six months, but there is no need to change over to these.

Cows' milk can be mixed with food from six months and whole cows' milk can be given as a drink from one year. Semi-skimmed milk can be introduced once your child is two years old, as long as they're a good eater and they have a varied diet. Skimmed and 1% milk aren't suitable for children under five, as they don't contain enough calories.

Infant formula, follow-on formula or growing-up milks are not needed once your baby is 12 months old. Goats' and sheep's milk are not suitable as a drink for babies under one year.

You can give your child unsweetened calcium-fortified milk alternatives, such as soya, almond and oat drinks, as part of a healthy, balanced diet from the age of one. Toddlers and young children under the age of five should not be given rice drinks because of the levels of arsenic they contain.

If your child has an allergy or intolerance to milk, talk to your health visitor or GP. They can advise you on suitable milk alternatives.

Thanks to NHS Choices.

