

WEANING YOUR BABY

Are you ready to wean? Do you think your child is ready to wean?

From the first time you feed your baby something other than your milk, the process of weaning begins. Weaning is the journey between when your child is fully breastfed (or breastmilk-fed, if you feed expressed milk) and when your child stops nursing for comfort and nutrition.

In the normal course of breastfeeding, weaning happens gradually and without any conscious effort or action. However, you may have a desire or reason to wean before your child would have naturally stopped nursing or receiving your milk.

If you need or want to actively wean before it happens on its own, it is best for you and your child to go slowly. Weaning suddenly can be physically painful for you and emotionally hard on you and your baby.

WHEN TO WEAN YOUR BABY

In cultures where there is no social pressure to wean, children usually stop breastfeeding or receiving their mother's milk between 2½ and 7 years old³.

In families that let it happen on its own, weaning happens very gradually, often without any fuss, process, or effort.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends:

- Breastfeed exclusively (no other foods or drinks) for the first 6 months of your baby's life.
- After 6 months of age, continue to breastfeed and begin to add solid foods (this is when weaning begins).
- After your baby's first birthday, continue to breastfeed for as long as both you and your baby are comfortable. Some mothers and babies continue to nurse into

the toddler years and beyond. Breastfeeding is good for mother and child at any age, and no evidence has been found of developmental harm from breastfeeding an older child.

You may also want to consider delaying weaning if:

- Your child is teething or sick. Your baby will need extra comfort during these times. Also, the antibodies in your breastmilk help your baby fight off illness and germs.
- Your family is going through a major change, like moving or if you recently went back to work and your baby is now in child care.
- Your baby is struggling. If your baby is resisting all your attempts to wean, it may just not be the right time. If you can, wait and try again in another month or two.

If you have been advised to stop breastfeeding because you need surgery or you take a certain medicine, be sure to get to a second opinion. There are very few reasons that complete weaning is absolutely necessary. In most cases, you can still breastfeed after surgery, and many medicines are safe for both baby and mother.

Talk to an IBCLC who can help you decide whether you truly need to wean or just need some help getting you and your baby through a difficult time. You also can call the Office on Women's Health Helpline at 800-994-9662, Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. ET.

Also, try not to make the decision to wean on a day when breastfeeding is difficult.

³Dettwyler, K. A., Stuart-Macadam, P. (Eds.). (1995). *Breastfeeding: Biocultural Perspectives*. Piscataway, NJ: Aldine Transaction. Accessed on August 4, 2014, from Rogoff, B. (2003). *The Cultural Nature of Human Development*. Oxford University Press. pp. 64–65.

HOW TO TELL WHEN YOUR CHILD IS READY TO WEAN

Children who wean themselves rarely do so suddenly and without warning. The process is generally slow and gradual, even for babies who wean from the breast earlier than is normal due to separation from their mothers, pacifier use, or bottle-feeding.

If your baby suddenly rejects your breast, it is more likely a nursing strike, not a readiness to wean. Read more about nursing strikes on [page 28](#).

You can watch for these signs, but they may be so gradual you may not notice:

NURSING SESSIONS HAPPEN LESS OFTEN.

As children age, they naturally become more occupied with playing, exploring, and using their new skills like walking, talking, and eating interesting foods.

Nursing sessions get further apart, even to the point of happening once a day, or, as time goes on, once every few days or a few times a month.

HE OR SHE LOSES INTEREST IN NURSING.

Young children (younger than a year) who seem to lose interest in breastfeeding may do so because they get the comfort they need from sucking on pacifiers or their thumbs. These comforting behaviors may be more familiar to them than nursing. For these babies, weaning from the breast may not be difficult, but their nutritional and emotional needs will remain.



DOES MY CHILD NEED FORMULA WHEN I WEAN?

It depends on the age of your child.

IF YOUR BABY IS YOUNGER THAN 1 YEAR, your baby will need formula to replace the nutrition that is received at your breast. Because your breastmilk changes to meet your baby's needs as he gets older, he gets the nutrition he needs from the same number of ounces at 9 months as at 3 months old.

This is not true of formula. A breastmilk-fed baby who is weaned to formula may need more ounces of formula than breastmilk. Talk to your child's doctor to find out how much formula your baby needs and how to recognize signs that your baby is tolerating the formula well.

IF YOUR BABY IS OLDER THAN 1 YEAR, you can offer a meal or snack or a drink of water or cow's milk (if tolerated) at the time you would normally feed your child.

HOW TO WEAN YOUR BABY

Weaning works best when it happens slowly, in its own time. However, there are some reasons you may have to stop breastfeeding before your baby is ready and even perhaps before you planned to stop breastfeeding.

Weaning your child suddenly — going “cold turkey” — may cause your breasts to become painfully engorged.

- If your baby is still very young, you may need to express some milk from your breasts or pump a tiny amount if your breasts become uncomfortable. Do not express or pump the amount you normally would for a feeding. When you pump or nurse, your breasts make more milk in response. By removing less milk than normal, your breasts will make less milk. Contact an IBCLC if you have overly full breasts while weaning.
- You will need to substitute your milk with formula if your baby is **younger than 1 year**. If your baby is **older than 1 year**, you can stop offering the breast and drop one feeding a time, over several weeks.
- Start by taking away his or her least favorite feeding first. Nursing sessions that come before falling asleep or

after waking are often the ones to go last. Wait a few days to drop another feeding.

- Avoid sitting in your special nursing chair, but do offer extra cuddles or babywearing during this transition so your child can still enjoy being close to you.
- Distract your child with an activity or outing during the times when you would normally nurse.
- If your baby likes to nurse to sleep, try a car ride or let your partner do the bedtime routine.
- Remember, even if you and your child are ready to wean, it can be hard emotionally on both of you. Give your baby lots of extra love and attention during this time.
- Talk to your child about weaning. Even young children can understand what you are saying and offer their opinions and ideas for how best to stop breastfeeding.

Even when you wean slowly and gradually, it may still be uncomfortable for you. Try these tips to ease discomfort.

- Hand-express or pump just enough milk to take the pressure off.
- **Do not bind your breasts.** This

can cause plugged ducts or a breast infection.

- Talk to your doctor about whether a pain reliever, such as ibuprofen, might be helpful for you.
- Some women also report relief from pain with cabbage leaves, herbs, or medicines. Always talk to your doctor before trying any herbal remedies or alternative therapies to make sure they are safe for you and your baby.
- Cold cabbage leaves feel good on engorged breasts. (Talk to your doctor before using cabbage leaves if you are allergic to cabbage or sulfa.) Chill the cabbage leaves and wash before using. Crunch each leaf in your hand to break the veins. Then place the leaves in your bra over your breasts and under the arms if needed. Leave the cabbage leaves on until they wilt. Apply new leaves as often as needed for comfort.
 - Sage tea has natural estrogen (a female hormone) that can decrease your milk supply. Other herbs that may help with weaning include peppermint, parsley, yarrow, and jasmine. Antihistamines or hormonal birth control may also help reduce milk supply.