

Weaning babies and children (3 months to 4 years)

About weaning

Weaning is when you stop breastfeeding your child. Weaning starts when your baby has any food other than breastmilk at times during the day, and weaning ends when she no longer has any breastmilk.

If you're feeling a bit sad about the last breastfeed, that's pretty normal. It might help to remind yourself that you've done a great job giving your child a healthy start to life.

When is the right time to wean?

Exclusive breastfeeding is recommended until your baby starts eating solid foods at around six months. It's best for your baby if you keep breastfeeding while giving your baby solids until at least 12 months.

You might decide to stop breastfeeding when or before your baby reaches 12 months. For example, you might find that you start thinking about weaning when you're getting ready to return to work.

If your baby is older than six months and developing well, you might decide to try night weaning while still breastfeeding during the day. On the other hand, if you're comfortable with feeding your baby during the night, there's no hurry to phase out night feeds. You can choose what works best for you and your baby.

Your baby might even start weaning before you're ready, but this is less common.

Some children are more attached to breastfeeding than other children are. If you don't want to wait for your child to wean herself, weaning can take place when you're ready.

Replacing breastmilk with cow's milk or formula

Children over 12 months of age can be given cow's milk instead of breastmilk. Babies younger than 12 months shouldn't be offered cow's milk. They need to be given formula.

You can give your baby cow's milk or formula from a cup or a bottle. If your baby is around 7-8 months, she could learn to drink straight from a cup.

Tips for weaning

When you're weaning, take it slowly so your child can get used to the change in routine and diet, and your body can get used to no longer making milk. Here are some ideas:

- You can replace a breastfeed with expressed breastmilk, infant formula or cow's milk from a cup or bottle.
- Drop one breastfeed at a time, and wait a few days before you drop the next one. This will also be easier on your breasts, which might get engorged if you stop too suddenly.

- Start by dropping the breastfeed your child likes the least. Or you might drop daytime breastfeeds first, then gradually drop any bedtime or night-time feeds – these are the ones your child probably feels most needy about.
- Before stopping breastfeeding altogether, go from one feed a day to one feed every few days, if you need to. This can help you avoid engorged breasts.
- Offer some extra comfort as you and your child make the transition to bottle-feeding or drinking from a cup. Plenty of cuddles and time with you can help your child feel secure and loved without relying on the breast.
- Watch out for lumpy breasts in the 5–10 days after your child has stopped breastfeeding. A lump might indicate a blocked duct or the beginnings of mastitis. If this happens, try massaging the lumps or expressing a small amount of milk. If any lump is persistent or painful or you start feeling flu-like symptoms, see your doctor as soon as possible.

Tips for weaning older children

When you're weaning older children off breastfeeding, a good way to start is to never offer a breastfeed, but never refuse.

Here are more tips that can help:

- Introduce a few limits, like not breastfeeding when you're out, or feeding only after lunch during the day.
- Introduce lots of activities and outings into your daily routine so your child is too busy and distracted to think about breastfeeding.
- Try the 'out of sight, out of mind' principle. This involves leaving your child with someone she's comfortable with at times when she'd normally have a breastfeed, because she'll be less likely to miss it if you're not around.
- Avoid dressing and undressing while your child is around, and wear clothes that make it hard for your child to get to your breasts – for example, dresses rather than separates.
- If your child wakes in the night for a breastfeed, try to let your spouse or someone else settle her with a cup of milk or water.
- If your child is used to being fed to sleep, change the routine by offering a story after the feed, as an incentive to stay awake.
- Break the association between feeding and sleeping by feeding outside the bedroom, and not just before bed. Once you've broken the association, over time you can drop the feed.