How to stop breastfeeding

It's up to you and your baby to decide when you want to finish breastfeeding.

How long to breastfeed

It's recommended that you breastfeed your baby exclusively (give them breast milk only) for the first 6 months of their life.

Breastfeeding still has lots of benefits for you and your baby after 6 months. It protects them from infections and there's some evidence that it helps with the digestion of your baby's first solid foods. It also continues to provide the balance of nutrients your baby needs.

The World Health Organization recommends that all babies are exclusively breastfed for the first 6 months of their life, and from 6 months babies should start eating solid foods as well as being breastfed for up to 2 years or longer.

Stopping breastfeeding gradually

There's no right or wrong way to stop breastfeeding. For lots of mothers and babies, stopping breastfeeding happens gradually as the child grows and eats more solid foods.

It's important that solid food should not simply replace breast milk. There's evidence that breast milk may play a part in helping a baby's digestive system to deal with their first solids.

Once they're eating solids, your baby will still need to have breast milk or formula as their main drink up to at least their 1st birthday.

Cows' milk is not suitable as a main drink for babies under 1 year old, although it can be added to foods, such as mashed potatoes.

Carrying on breastfeeding while giving your baby some formula can work very well.

Babies breastfeed for comfort as well as food. Phasing out breastfeeding gently will give you both time to get used to the idea. Stopping gradually will also help prevent problems like overfull, hard (engorged) breasts and mastitis.

You'll probably find it easiest to drop 1 feed at a time. It does not matter which feed you drop first, so it will usually be a case of how it fits in with your life. For example, some mothers may prefer to continue night feeds so their baby can still have the comfort at night.

If your baby is younger than 1 year, you'll need to replace the dropped breastfeed with a formula feed from a bottle or (if they're over 6 months) a cup or beaker, instead.

If your child is over 1 year and having a variety of foods and drinks, they will not need a replacement feed.

Once you and your baby are settled into a pattern of having 1 less breastfeed, you can then think about dropping another feed. Completely stopping breastfeeding can take anything from a few weeks to several months.

If you're trying to stop breastfeeding and having problems, you can get help and ideas from a health visitor or a breastfeeding specialist.

Common reasons for stopping breastfeeding

Sore or painful breasts

Some women find breastfeeding uncomfortable, especially in the early days and weeks. Common problems include sore or cracked nipples and painful breasts.

These problems can often happen when your baby is not positioned or attached well at the breast. A midwife, health visitor or a breastfeeding specialist can help you with positioning your baby and getting them properly attached.

Not enough breast milk

Lots of women worry that their baby is not getting enough milk when in fact they have plenty to meet their baby's needs.

A midwife, health visitor or breastfeeding specialist can suggest ways to increase your milk supply if necessary. This could just mean making sure your baby is well attached to the breast and that you're feeding often enough.

Going back to work

Some women worry about breastfeeding and returning to work. Going back to work does not necessarily mean you have to stop breastfeeding.

If your breast milk supply is well established, going back to work does not have to affect your milk supply for your baby. You can either express at work, give your breast milk to your child's carer, or provide formula milk while you're away.

Going on holiday

As with work, going on holiday does not mean that you have to give up breastfeeding. In fact, breastfeeding can be more convenient while you're away.

If you breastfeed, you do not need to worry about boiling water and sterilising feeding equipment. Plus, if you're flying, there's no need to worry about restrictions on carrying bottles or cups of formula through airport security checks.

Breastfeeding also helps to equalise the pressure in your baby's ears on take-off or landing.

Getting pregnant again

If you get pregnant again while you're breastfeeding, it should not affect your baby or the pregnancy. However, you may feel tired, and changes in your appetite and emotions can make breastfeeding more challenging.

Do not be put off feeding an older baby and a newborn (tandem nursing). The more milk your babies take, the more your breasts produce, so it's possible to feed more than 1 baby.

Taking some medicines

Most medicines can be taken while you're breastfeeding without harming your baby.

But it's always best to tell a doctor, dentist or pharmacist if you're breastfeeding.

Restarting breastfeeding after stopping

Stopping breastfeeding does not always have to be permanent, but starting again may take a lot of time and not everyone will produce enough to meet their baby's needs. It partly depends on how well-established your milk supply was already.

Stimulating your breasts by expressing breast milk and offering the breast to your baby regularly can encourage your body to start making milk again.

Skin-to-skin contact with your baby can promote lactation (milk production) too.

You can ask a midwife, health visitor or a breastfeeding specialist for help if you would like to restart breastfeeding.

Breastfeeding older children

There's no reason why you should not continue breastfeeding your child into their 2nd year and beyond. You and your toddler can continue to enjoy the benefits of breastfeeding for as long as you want to.

Your toddler may also find breastfeeding comforting when they're ill or upset.