



# Why Do Infants Need Baby Formula Instead of Cow's Milk?

Many parents ask why they can't feed their baby regular cow's milk instead of breastmilk (/English/ages-stages/baby/breastfeeding/Pages/Where-We-Stand-Breastfeeding.aspx) or formula. There are two main reasons: Infants cannot digest cow's milk as completely or easily as they digest breastmilk or baby formula. And, more importantly, cow's milk does not contain enough of certain nutrients that babies under a year old need.



During the current **baby formula shortage** (<https://www.fda.gov/news-events/press-announcements/fda-takes-important-steps-improve-supply-infant-and-specialty-formula-products>), it may be OK for some babies over 6 months of age to have cow's milk for a short period of time if no formula is available. If you aren't able to find baby formula in stock anywhere, talk with your pediatrician and read more [here \(/English/tips-tools/ask-the-pediatrician/Pages/are-there-shortages-of-infant-formula-due-to-COVID-19.aspx?\\_gl=1%2a66n8tg%2a\\_ga%2aMTMyMzY1NDM2OC4xNTE1MTA1ODA3%2a\\_ga\\_FD9D3XZVQQ%2aMTY1MjMwMjUwMS45NjcuMS4xNjUyMzA3NzcxLjA.&\\_ga=2.7327409.2022903346.1652105247-1323654368.1515105807&\\_gac=1.91817448.1651607387.CjwKCAjwsJ6TBhAIEiwAfl4TWfQynAK1ihQfBpoOjgyqSuE\\_yaa5IaPVhcRkw8djz7a7F2k0oBc9nyRoCn08QAvD\\_BwE\)](/English/tips-tools/ask-the-pediatrician/Pages/are-there-shortages-of-infant-formula-due-to-COVID-19.aspx?_gl=1%2a66n8tg%2a_ga%2aMTMyMzY1NDM2OC4xNTE1MTA1ODA3%2a_ga_FD9D3XZVQQ%2aMTY1MjMwMjUwMS45NjcuMS4xNjUyMzA3NzcxLjA.&_ga=2.7327409.2022903346.1652105247-1323654368.1515105807&_gac=1.91817448.1651607387.CjwKCAjwsJ6TBhAIEiwAfl4TWfQynAK1ihQfBpoOjgyqSuE_yaa5IaPVhcRkw8djz7a7F2k0oBc9nyRoCn08QAvD_BwE).

## Beyond digestion

Cow's milk contains high concentrations of protein and minerals, which can stress a newborn's immature kidneys and cause severe illness at times of heat stress, fever, or diarrhea. In addition, cow's milk lacks the proper amounts of iron, vitamin C, and other nutrients that infants need. It may even cause iron-deficiency anemia (/English/health-issues/conditions/chronic/Pages/Anemia-and-Your-Child.aspx) in some babies, since cow's milk protein can irritate the lining of the stomach and intestine, leading to loss of blood in the stools. Cow's milk also does not contain the healthiest types of fat for growing babies. **For these reasons, your baby should not receive any cow's milk (or other non-human milk or milk substitute) until they are about 12 months of age unless no alternative is available.**

## Once your baby turns a year old

Once your baby is past one year old, you may give them pasteurized whole cow's milk or reduced-fat (2%) milk, provided they have a balanced diet of solid foods (/English/ages-stages/baby/feeding-nutrition/Pages/Starting-Solid-Foods.aspx) (cereals, vegetables, fruits and meats). But limit their intake of milk to 2 cups (about 16 ounces) per day or less. More than 24 ounces a day has been associated with iron deficiency if toddlers aren't getting enough other healthy iron-rich foods. If your baby is not yet eating a broad range of solid foods, talk to your pediatrician about the best nutrition for them.

At this age, children still need a higher fat content, which is why whole vitamin D-fortified milk is recommended for most infants after one year of age. If your child is or is at risk for overweight, or if there is a family history (/English/family-life/health-management/Pages/Your-Family-Health-History-and-Genetics.aspx) of obesity, high blood pressure or heart disease, your pediatrician may recommend 2% (reduced-fat) milk.

## Age 2 and up

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**Do not give your baby 1% (low-fat) or nonfat (skimmed) milk before their second birthday, as it does not contain enough fat for brain development.** After two years of age, you should discuss your child's nutritional needs with your pediatrician. However, many children at this age can transition to lower-fat milk if that is what your family uses.

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