



Weaning the Breastfed Baby

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Weaning is the process of gradually reducing the frequency of breastfeeding, so that the baby is gradually taking less breastmilk in his/her diet.

Babies are healthiest if they can continue to breastfeed until at least 1 year or longer, but sometimes mothers need or decide to wean earlier for many different reasons.

Mothers do not need to fully wean their babies from the breast when they need to decrease the frequency of breastfeeding. A mother can decide to nurse her baby less often, such as 3-4 times a day, rather than 8 times a day, and still continue to nurse the baby for a year or longer. She will have less milk if she nurses less often, but she will continue to lactate until she completely stops nursing and/or expressing her milk.

Weaning should be a personal decision by the mother, and not a decision made by other family members. Mothers should not feel ashamed, cajoled, or threatened to wean her baby from nursing. Breastfeeding is the greatest first gift a mother can give to her baby, since breastfeeding allows for optimal infant health, in the short term and long term. Comments made to mothers about weaning are most often based on myth, cultural bias, and are often not respectful to the mother and infant.

Here are some tips on weaning:

1. Child-led weaning

This is a natural way of weaning older babies and toddlers. The child gradually shows less and less interest in nursing over time, and eventually stops nursing. This is the easiest way to wean. Mom's breastmilk supply will gradually adjust by making less milk over time. If the child suddenly stops nursing and mother does not want to maintain her milk supply, she will need to pump or manually express her breasts when they feel full, to more gradually wean. When expressing her breasts, she should not fully empty, just express enough milk to be comfortable. Her body will adjust quicker if she does not fully empty her breasts.

2. Mother-led weaning

This method involves the mother initiating the weaning. The mother would drop a nursing session, and substitute infant formula or stored breastmilk instead via cup or bottle. Her body will adjust to skipping that feeding in a few days. At that point, she can drop another nursing session at an opposite time of the day, and again allow her body to adjust before continuing to drop nursing sessions. Once she drops her last nursing session, she may need to express her milk to comfort in a day or two. It will often take 2 weeks for a mother who is fully nursing to wean.

If the mother prefers to stop nursing immediately, she can wean via pumping. She would pump to comfort at regular intervals, such as every 4 hours. The breasts should not be fully emptied. Once she is comfortable with every 4 hours, she should decrease to every 6 hours, then eventually every 8-10 hours, etc. The speed of weaning depends on how her breasts adjust. Her breasts should be comfortable without excessive engorgement before increasing the intervals between pumpings.

3. Keeping the breasts comfortable during weaning

- 1) When the breasts feel full, mom should either manually express or pump just to comfort. Leaving the breasts somewhat full tells the breasts that milk is no longer needed. The body then decides to make less milk.
- 2) Cold compresses can help to reduce the supply, and a hot shower can help to release extra milk when feeling too full.
- 3) Some medications can reduce the milk supply, namely decongestants such as pseudoephedrine, and the birth control pill with estrogen. Natural substances that can reduce the supply include peppermint, such as strong peppermint lozenges, peppermint or spearmint tea. The herb sage also can reduce the supply. Sage can be purchased as an extract, or added as an herb to mom's food.

4. Weaning the toddler who loves to nurse

Children who breastfeed into toddlerhood often nurse for comfort, security, and relaxation, as well as for nutrition. Here are some strategies:

- 1) If the toddler is still nursing whenever he chooses to, consider putting the toddler on a breastfeeding routine, so that the child is only nursing at times that are ideal for mom, such as in the am upon awakening, before and after naps, and at bedtime. Sometimes this is liberating enough for moms so that they feel more in control of breastfeeding, and then are willing to continue nursing.
- 2) Once the toddler is on a nursing routine, start dropping nursing sessions. Depending on the age of the child, different strategies work to transition the toddlers to not nurse, such as distraction with toys, books, or a special treat.
- 3) Some toddlers adjust best if mom is not around at that particular time of the dropped feeding. Changing the toddler's routine may also help, such as having dad put the child to bed rather than mom.