

WEANING YOUR BREASTFEEDING CHILD

You may wonder how long to breastfeed your child. Breastfeeding continues to be a valuable source of nutrition and disease protection for both mother and child, for as long as breastfeeding continues. “Weaning” is a personal decision that considers the needs of both the mother and her child. The following information will help you make decisions that work for your family.

What is weaning?

- When a baby stops breastfeeding or drinking breastmilk
- It is a normal stage in development – all children eventually stop breastfeeding

How long is breastfeeding recommended?

International and Canadian health agencies, including the Canadian Paediatric Society and York Region Public Health recommend that:

- Babies need only breastmilk for the first six months
- At six months, babies begin to eat solid foods and continue to breastfeed for up to two years and beyond

When do I wean my child?

- There is no “right” age to wean
- Weaning happens when you and your child are ready

If I decide to wean, what do I feed my child in place of breastmilk?

This will depend upon your child’s age. Under six months of age, if not breastfeeding directly or feeding expressed breastmilk, offer any basic, 0-12 months, commercial infant formula. If your child is older, it is best to speak with your health care provider or call York Region Health Connection at 1-800-361-5653 to speak to a Registered Nurse.

How do I wean my child?

There are different ways to wean. Find the method that is right for you and your child, or just let it happen naturally.

Natural weaning:

- Is child-led
- Occurs when a child slowly shows less interest in breastfeeding over a number of weeks or months
- Will vary in age from child to child, just like walking or talking does
- Occurs globally on average between three and four years of age
- Lets your child outgrow the need at their own rate until they no longer breastfeed

PUBLIC HEALTH

1-800-361-5653

TTY: 1-866-512-6228

york.ca/breastfeeding

Nursing Strikes

A baby who “weans himself” before 12 months of age is very unusual. These periods are referred to as nursing strikes. Nursing strikes can almost always be overcome! A public health nurse or breastfeeding expert can help you and your child continue breastfeeding after a nursing strike. Call York Region Health Connection for more information.

Gradual planned weaning

- Is mother-led, over weeks or months
- Gradually replaces breastfeeding with other appropriate nutrition
- Allows your milk supply to decrease slowly so you will be less likely to have breast pain or an infection
- Is easier than abrupt weaning for both yourself and your child

How to gradually wean:

- Start by dropping one breastfeed per day and replace this feed with other age-appropriate foods and drinks
- Drop your child’s least favourite breastfeed first – favourite feeds are usually when your child first wakes up in the morning or just before bedtime.
- Every two or three days, drop another breastfeed at a different time. If you removed a feed in the mid-morning first, remove a feed in the midafternoon next.

Note: If breasts feel full and uncomfortable, hand express to comfort.

Partial weaning

- Is mother-led
- Allows mothers to drop some breastfeeding sessions but keep breastfeeding for the rest of the time
- Works well if you are going back to work outside the home but still want to breastfeed in the mornings and evenings

How to partially wean:

- Drop the chosen breastfeeds and replace with other age appropriate foods and drinks including expressed breastmilk
- You may vary breastfeeds from day to day
- If you want to add more breastfeeds back into a day, offer the breast more often

Abrupt or sudden weaning

- Is mother-led
- May be more stressful for mother and child
- May occur if breastfeeding needs to be stopped suddenly because of medications or sudden illness. Speak with your physician and a breastfeeding expert to find out if breastfeeding really must be stopped.
- Call Mother Risk at 416-813-6780 if you are unsure whether a medication you are taking is safe while breastfeeding. Most medications are safe to take while breastfeeding.

How to suddenly wean:

- If you only need to stop breastfeeding for a short time, continue to express milk by hand or with a pump to keep up your supply so that your child can begin breastfeeding again once you are both able
- Apply cold cloths or packs to your breasts to reduce swelling. Avoid tight bras, or binding your breasts
- Watch for signs of infection: fever, redness on the breast, flu-like symptoms. See your doctor right away if these symptoms occur
- There are no safe medications to decrease milk supply

Alternative to sudden weaning

You can stop putting your child to the breast, but continue to express breastmilk for a period of time to let your supply decrease slowly and make you more comfortable.

- Can hand express or use a pump
- Express breastmilk less often and remove less milk over days or weeks

Strategies for weaning your toddler

- **“Don’t Offer, Don’t Refuse”:** Breastfeed whenever your child asks, but don’t offer when the child does not ask.
- **Set limits:** Talk with your child to set limits on feeding times, length of feeds or locations for feeds. Choose what works for you.
- **Change daily routines:** Children often have special times or locations which they associate with breastfeeding. Change your routine so your child is not reminded of the breastfeed he is missing.
- **Have your child spend time with other family members:** Having your child spend close time with your family or another trusted adult when they would normally breastfeed may be reassuring and distract your child from the usual breastfeeding routine