

Ending breastfeeding naturally

If you choose to let your child decide when they're ready to stop breastfeeding, don't worry - your child won't still be breastfeeding when they go off to college! Like all mammals, they'll gradually stop when they no longer need to breastfeed. Most children who stop of their own accord, do so around the ages of 3 or 4, although for some it's earlier and some it's later. Remember too that breastfeeding a toddler or a preschooler doesn't look the same as breastfeeding an infant. They are able to accept boundaries, and towards the end of a nursing relationship may only feed once a day or even less often. The end of breastfeeding will be a gradual, smooth transition. Some parents aren't even aware that the last time they breastfeed is in fact the last time. Sometimes toddlers partially stop and then increase their feeds again temporarily when unwell, or at other times of change like moving to a new house.

“When I was pregnant, I was aiming to breastfeed for about three months. I don't think I even had a concept of a breastfeeding toddler. I'm really glad I continued. Stopping was a very gradual process. There are more mums who have breastfed older babies and toddlers than you think.”

There are many reasons why a person might choose to allow their child to stop breastfeeding when they are ready. However, continuing to breastfeed past 6 months or a year doesn't mean you have to do natural-term breastfeeding. You may just decide that

breastfeeding's working well for you and you'd like to continue a bit longer before stopping.

If you feel under pressure to stop but would like to continue, you might find it helpful to share some of this information, speak to a Breastfeeding Counsellor on our helpline, or connect with mums nursing toddlers or older children at a breastfeeding group or in an online forum.

The time to wean is different for every family; the choice is yours.

Visit the ABM's website to find out the different ways we can support you and how you can find us on social media.

Also available from ABM:

- Questions mums ask about stopping breastfeeding

“Many toddlers I know who are still breastfed, have only one or two feeds a day, normally in the morning or just before bed. It's enjoyable and useful for parents too, allowing an extra hour or so feeding and dozing in bed in the morning and offering a peaceful, easy way to help your child fall asleep in the evening.”

Association of Breastfeeding Mothers

registered charity no 280537

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Breastfeeding Beyond Infancy



helpline: 0300 100 0212

www.abm.me.uk

The World Health Organisation, UNICEF and the UK Department of Health recommend that ideally, babies' only food should be breastmilk for around six months. Breastfeeding can then continue alongside suitable solid foods up to two years old or beyond.

It's completely normal for a young child to continue to be breastfed for several years - in fact this is nature's design! In the UK however, many mums stop breastfeeding earlier, and so we often hear the term 'extended' breastfeeding for anything past 6 months or a year. Another term you might hear is 'natural-term' or 'full-term' breastfeeding, which is continuing to breastfeed until little ones naturally stop by themselves.

Why continue to breastfeed an older baby?

So, your baby's getting older, and you're wondering whether to stop breastfeeding or to continue a bit longer. It may help to remember that:

- breastfeeding has nutritional, emotional and health benefits for your toddler
- sustaining breastfeeding is good for mum's health
- many benefits are dose-related: the more the better

Nutritional benefits

The make-up of breastmilk changes during a feed and over the day. It also changes over weeks and months. Breastmilk is still a great source of nutrients and immunity even when your child is eating a full and varied diet. When your toddler's ill, or teething, they might refuse other foods and drinks, so it's good to know that by breastfeeding, you're providing comfort as well as fluids and nutrition.

Immune system benefits

Breastfed toddlers get ill less often. When they do get ill, they tend to cope better and recover more quickly. The immunity that breastfeeding provides is especially important in the first few weeks of life but continues to benefit your child for as long as you continue to breastfeed, and for many years afterwards.

A child's immune system develops very slowly and *isn't completely mature until around the age of six*, so extended breastfeeding will offer vital protection through this stage. Breastfeeding also helps to prevent allergies. Continuing to breastfeed while babies start eating potentially allergenic foods has been found to protect children in families susceptible to allergies.

Studies have shown that many of the immune factors passed on through your breastmilk actually increase in concentration in the second year.

Psychological benefits

Breastfeeding is a precious source of comfort and security. It can be a haven for toddlers experiencing the frustrations of life at this age. Some breastfeeding mums wonder how they would cope with the 'terrible twos' without using nursing as a tool for instant calming and connection.

You won't spoil your baby, or produce a clingy child, by breastfeeding whenever he asks. In fact, we now know that the opposite is true. By giving toddlers this unrestricted and loving source of security, you are providing them with the ideal base from which to explore the world and build their own independence.

Your breastfeeding toddler trusts you to be there for them whenever they are feeling cross, tired or stressed. It's only through meeting these early needs completely that your child will be able to grow secure and develop their own independence. It can be very calming for mums, too.

Other benefits for your baby or toddler

There are many other dose-dependent benefits associated with breastfeeding including:

- a lower risk of becoming obese later in life
- improved cognitive development
- a lower risk of ear infections

Benefits for mum

Extended feeding offers many physical benefits to a mother. For example, studies have found that the longer you breastfeed for, the lower your risk of certain types of cancer.

Breastfeeding also helps to protect mums against osteoporosis and fractures later in life. While breastfeeding, you might have a small reduction of bone mineral. However, when you eventually stop, your body can actually build your bones back stronger than you were to start with. This means that many mums will actually have a higher bone mineral density than before they started.

Continuing to breastfeed sometimes delays the return of fertility and menstruation, as ovulation can be suppressed.

“My youngest daughter showed little interest in other foods until she was about 11 months old and, even now, won't sit down and eat a full meal. It's reassuring to know that by continuing to breastfeed I'm providing her with an excellent source of nutrients.”