



**Australian
Breastfeeding
Association**

**For Health
Professionals**

Weaning

Whether they breastfeed for a few days or several years, every breastfed baby is weaned eventually.

Resources for families

Information for breastfeeding mothers can be found by searching for 'weaning' on the Australian Breastfeeding Association (ABA) website, breastfeeding.asn.au

ABA's comprehensive booklet, *Breastfeeding: weaning*, is available for purchase in print or digital format via ABA's online Marketplace.

ABA breastfeeding counsellors do not provide medical advice. However, a call to the National Breastfeeding Helpline on 1800 686 268 can provide a woman with judgement-free support and practical suggestions for weaning her child.

Further reading

Brodribb, W. (Ed.). (2019). Feeding the older child and weaning. In *Breastfeeding Management in Australia* (5th ed., pp. 123-134). Australian Breastfeeding Association.

Timing of weaning

The timing of weaning is a personal decision for each mother and her child. The right time will depend on their physical and emotional needs and their personal circumstances.

Along with the World Health Organization (WHO), the Australian Breastfeeding Association (ABA) supports continued breastfeeding to 2 years and beyond, for as long as mother and child wish.^{1,2} Early weaning increases the risk of a number of infections and chronic diseases in both mother and child,³ therefore supporting continued breastfeeding promotes good health.

Most infants in Australia are weaned before their first birthday,⁴ however anthropological studies estimate the natural weaning age for human infants lies somewhere after 2½ years.⁵

When weaning isn't the only option

Mothers commonly experience pressure to wean for reasons that aren't always valid. These include:

- the eruption of teeth
- concerns about milk quantity or quality
- returning to work
- when they or their baby are unwell
- pregnancy or the arrival of a new baby
- social pressure from family, friends or community.

Mothers often have other options, besides weaning, in these circumstances. ABA can provide information and support to help a mother decide if weaning is the right choice for her and her baby at this time.

With support from their healthcare provider, unwell mothers can often choose treatment options that allow breastfeeding to continue safely.⁶ For the unwell child, breastmilk contains immune-protective factors which may help them to recover more quickly.⁷ Breastfeeding comforts a sick child and provides hydration and nutrients when they may be eating little other food.⁸ Nourishing and nurturing their baby can also be reassuring for mothers during this potentially stressful time.



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1. World Health Organization. (n.d.). Breastfeeding: Recommendations. <https://www.who.int/health-topics/breastfeeding>
2. Australian Breastfeeding Association. (2013). Position statement on breastfeeding. <https://www.breastfeeding.asn.au/position-statement-breastfeeding>
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5. Dettwyler, K. (1995). A time to wean: The Hominid blueprint for the natural age of weaning in modern human populations. In P. Stuart-Macadam & K. A. Dettwyler (Eds.), *Breastfeeding: Biocultural perspectives* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315081984>
6. National Institute of Health. LactMed Drugs and Lactation Database. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK501922/>
7. Hanson, L. (2004). *Immunobiology of human milk: How breastfeeding protects babies* (1st ed.). Pharmasoft Publishing.
8. Coates, M. M., & Riordan, J. (1992). Breastfeeding during maternal or infant illness. *Clinical Issues in Perinatal and Women's Health Nursing*, 3(4), 683-694.
9. National Health and Medical Research Council. (2012). Infant Feeding Guidelines: Information for health workers. <https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/about-us/publications/infant-feeding-guidelines-information-health-workers>
10. World Health Organization. (2023). WHO guideline for complementary feeding of infants and young children 6-23 months of age. <https://www.who.int/publications/item/9789240081864>

Safe and comfortable weaning

No matter when and why it occurs, weaning should ideally be a gradual process. Weaning over many weeks or months allows the child to gradually replace breastmilk with other sources of nutrition and protects the health of mothers. As breastfeeding decreases, the milk supply will slowly decrease, minimising the risk of localised breast inflammation and mastitis.

An older child may continue to breastfeed for nutrition, comfort and connection, even once they are eating a wide range of foods. Weaning gradually gives the child time to adjust and the mother time to develop other ways of comforting and connecting with their child.

A mother can begin weaning by reducing the amount of milk removed from her breasts. Over time, this will cause her supply to drop. She can encourage this by:

- reducing the frequency and length of feeds
- feeding from one breast only at each feed
- offering a dummy if baby likes to suck
- replacing breastfeeds with expressed breastmilk, formula or pasteurised animal milk, as appropriate for the child's age^{9,10}
- increasing the amount of solid foods and water after 12 months.

Prescription medicines sometimes used to suppress lactation are not usually helpful if lactation is already established.

Weaning can take several weeks or months, depending on how much milk the mother is producing when she begins to wean. Weaning too quickly can cause breast engorgement and discomfort. If this happens, mothers can:

- breastfeed or hand express just enough for comfort
- wear a supportive, well-fitting bra
- place cool packs in their bra
- use appropriate analgesic and/or anti-inflammatory medicines.

No matter when and why a mother weans, she may experience a deep sense of loss when her baby is no longer breastfeeding. Chatting with an ABA breastfeeding counsellor can help her to work through these feelings. No matter how long she breastfed for, she should know that every feed was a precious gift to her baby.