

Stopping Breastfeeding

This guide provides some information for if you choose to stop breastfeeding/ expressing breastmilk. Or maybe you need to stop for medical (this is very rare - please contact the Breastfeeding Network's drugs in breastmilk service¹ if this is a concern) or other reasons, or your child stops and their 'nursing strike' can't be resolved. Nursing strikes are usually temporary – La Leche League² has a good resource for solutions.

You can continue to breastfeed or provide your milk for your child, for as long as you are both happy and enjoying it. However, if you feel it's time to stop breastfeeding and/or expressing your milk, it's important to stop slowly. Stopping gradually will help protect against common problems like mastitis and low mood.

You might also feel that it's kinder to your child (and yourself?) to reduce gradually, so there is time to get used to the idea. This also "leaves the door open" to finding a middle ground, during the process of reducing you might find yourself in a place which works for your family such as breastfeeding once or twice a day or night weaning or breastfeeding at home without needing to express at work.

If for some reason you need to stop giving your milk to your child (such as for medical reasons) you should seek support from your GP, health visitor or local breastfeeding support service. It might be best to stop breastfeeding then gradually "pump down" your supply.

How to stop

The NHS³ suggest dropping 1 feed at a time. You should watch for any signs of engorgement and keep an eye on your child's mood and nappies. You can drop any feed or expressing session - whatever suits you best. *Maybe you'll prefer to drop a night feed or an expression during your working day?*

If your child is under 12 months you'll need to replace that feed with a bottle of formula or *maybe you have stored expressed milk in your freezer?*

If your child is over 12 months you can try offering water in a sippy cup and providing lots of nutrient-dense foods like avocado, pulses, nut butters, sweet potato, egg yolk, salmon (and fluid rich foods such as watermelon, tomato, cucumber if they are not keen on water). First steps nutrition provide useful resources on solids.⁴

Of course you can also stop breastfeeding more slowly...just gradually offer less breastfeeding or pump either for shorter periods or less often and over time your breastmilk supply will likely slow down.

NOTE: Many Mums experience an emotional dip after stopping breastfeeding their children, there is very little research on the subject⁵ but it seems likely that this is caused by hormonal changes. That said, it's helpful to be aware of this of as something to look out for, be kind to yourself and if you do start feeling low, maybe recognising there may be a hormonal cause could be helpful.

There may be a middle ground. Children breastfeed for comfort as well as nutrition:

Some mothers still put their children to the breast frequently despite not producing much milk. There might be a stage where breastfeeding is a helpful tool to have in your parenting toolbox, you can put your child to the breast to calm them and comfort them, there are analgesic properties in breastfeeding and it releases relaxing hormones - so much more than nutrition.

And remember some of the benefits of breastfeeding come from the *act of suckling* at the breast rather than the content of the milk e.g.: protection against ear infections is thought to be linked to the mouth shape and jaw action of breastfeeding-so the benefit is there when “suckling for comfort”.

If you are concerned about low mood contact your GP or health visitor. The Pandas Foundation⁶ and Maternal Mental Health Alliance⁷ also provide support and information on perinatal mental health. If you find yourself stopping breastfeeding before you wanted to you might find Professor Amy Brown's work on breastfeeding grief helpful.⁸

References

1. <https://www.breastfeedingnetwork.org.uk/drugs-factsheets/>
2. <https://laleche.org.uk/nursing-strikes/>
3. <https://www.nhs.uk/baby/breastfeeding-and-bottle-feeding/breastfeeding/how-to-stop/>
4. <https://www.firststepsnutrition.org/eating-well-resources>
5. <https://laleche.org.uk/after-weaning-what-next/>
6. <https://pandasfoundation.org.uk>
7. <https://maternalmentalhealthalliance.org>
8. <https://professoramybrown.co.uk/articles/f/supporting-breastfeeding-grief---a-collection-of-resources/>