

Suppression is the term used when you choose not to or are unable to breastfeed and you suppress your milk production from birth. Weaning is the term given to stopping breastfeeding (usually gradually) after a period of breastfeeding. (The term weaning is also sometimes used to mean the process where mothers gradually introduce their babies to family foods while continuing to breastfeed).

There are many reasons why women decide not to breastfeed, are unable to breastfeed, or decide to wean after a period of breastfeeding. The reasons and timing will be different for each mother and baby.

The World Health Organization recommends exclusive breastfeeding until around six months of age, the slow introduction of family foods from around six months, and continued breastfeeding until the age of two years and beyond. However, some women need or want to suppress their breast milk or wean before this time.

Weaning and suppression can cause different feelings and emotions. These can be discussed with your midwife, child and family health nurse, your GP, or an Australian Breastfeeding Association counsellor. Babies who are younger than 12 months and are not breastfeeding need a suitable cow's milk based infant formula. After 12 months, full-fat cow's milk can be given, toddler formulas are unnecessary. Toddler milks are very sweet and can decrease your baby's natural desire to taste and explore new family foods.

Suppression after birth

In the first days after birth, colostrum (first breast milk) will increase even if you have decided not to breastfeed. As your breasts become full, heavy, and tender use the following methods to reduce breast discomfort:

- A comfortable, supportive bra and breast pads may be useful.
- Apply cold packs such as chilled washers or a bag of frozen peas and change them often enough to keep you comfortable. Reapply as required.
- Limit stimulation and handling of your breasts.
- Avoid applying heat on your breasts.
- Take paracetamol as directed to relieve pain and discomfort.
- Hand express only enough breast milk to keep your breasts comfortable. This does not increase your milk supply.

Gradual Weaning after a period of breastfeeding

If you have been breastfeeding and decide to wean, it is better to do it over several days or weeks rather than suddenly. This is the safest method as it allows your baby and your breasts time to adjust. It reduces the risk of engorgement, breast inflammation, and mastitis.

- Drop one feed every few days. Replace this with family foods or milk from a bottle or a cup.
- Express for comfort at this time as needed, reducing this slowly. Watch for any signs of mastitis, such as redness, pain, or fever. If these occur, continue to express or breastfeed until resolved and contact a healthcare professional or breastfeeding counsellor.
- When your breasts feel comfortable, drop another feed. Continue to drop feeds in this way.

- During this time some breastfeeds may be substituted with family foods, formula, or cow's milk (depending on age of your baby).
- Milk leakage may occur for some time after the discomfort has settled.

How to suppress if you have been expressing and bottle feeding your milk

Slowly reduce the time expressing or slowly extend the time between the expressing sessions. Express just enough to keep your breasts comfortable.

Abrupt weaning after a period of breastfeeding

This is the sudden ending of all breastfeeds and is not recommended. You should seek the advice of your Child and Family Health Nurse, GP, Australian Breastfeeding Association Counsellor, or lactation consultant.

Weaning a child

- Breastmilk continues to be important for you and your child, no matter what age your child is. Breastmilk still provides nutrition, immune protection, and comfort.
- See gradual weaning method above.
- Offer alternative drinks (water or milk) in a cup and/or healthy snacks (for example fruit or cheese) at times you normally breastfeed or when your child asks for a breastfeed.
- Wear non-breastfeeding clothes; avoid clothes that show your breasts.
- Avoid sitting in your usual breastfeeding positions.
- Plan outings or activities to distract your child. Give extra cuddles and smiles.
- You may be able to gently discuss weaning with your older child.
- A child can use breastfeeding as a transition to sleep. Contact your Child and Family Health Nurse for further support if required.

Things to watch for

- Engorgement. This is when breasts become hard, red, shiny, and painful. If this happens, expressing to soften breasts, can relieve the pain. Continue to express just enough milk for comfort over several days. Cold packs may help. Resume suppressing when breasts are comfortable.
- Mastitis. This is a tender, inflamed area on the breast often accompanied by fever and joint aches and pains. Refer to the Mastitis leaflet and contact your midwife, Child and Family Health Nurse, Lactation Consultant, Australian Breastfeeding Association Counsellor or GP.

Resources

- Your Midwife, Child and Family Health Nurse, or Lactation Consultant
- Australian Breastfeeding Association www.breastfeeding.asn.au Helpline: 1800 686 268.
- Raising Children Network www.Raisingchildren.net.au
- Australian Infant Feeding Guidelines (2012) www.eatforhealth.gov.au
- If you need an interpreter, please call Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) on 131 450

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