

# Importance of Continuing Breastfeeding after Starting Solid Foods

*“Can I breastfeed?”... Yes, you can! And here’s how.*

Once your baby reaches 6 months old, she will be ready for solid foods, as well as breastmilk. **We call these foods complementary because they add to the baby’s diet rather than replacing breastmilk.** Breastmilk should remain the biggest part of your baby’s diet through the first year.

## **Do not rush to start solid foods before 6 months.**

- Breastmilk has all of the food and fluid that babies need during their first 6 months.
- When babies eat solid foods or juice before they are ready, they take less breastmilk. And breastmilk is the perfect mix of nutrition plus antibodies. So these babies receive less protection against illness and poorer nutrition in the first vulnerable months of life.
- Some parents are tempted to feed their baby cereal at night hoping to reduce nighttime feeds. But the research shows that babies that are fed solids in the first 6 months sleep about as much as those who are not.
- Starting other foods too early can cause digestive problems in your baby. This is because the baby’s gut is still developing and is immature. The immature gut is less able to fight infection, which can lead to diarrhea.
- Because the baby’s gut is immature during the first 6 months, it is less able to stop undigested proteins from entering the baby’s blood stream. This can lead to food allergies.
- Babies younger than 6 months lack the enzymes to fully digest cereals and proteins.
- Starting solid foods early can reduce the mother’s milk supply.

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## **At around six months your baby will show signs that she is ready for some solid foods.**

- Your baby will watch you eat, reach for your food, and seem eager to be fed.
- At about 6 months she will be able to sit up and swallow food easily.
- Around this time her tongue control will improve so that she can voluntarily draw her tongue in, to accept food.
- And her mouth cavity will deepen so that she can accept spoonfuls of food.

**Your baby will continue to get all the benefits of breastfeeding after she has started eating complementary foods. This is because:**

- Breastmilk will continue to provide your baby with immuno-protective factors, like antibodies, which reduce the likelihood that she will become sick.
- This includes a lower risk of obesity, diabetes and certain childhood cancers.
- Breastfeeding, like nothing else, helps an upset baby or toddler calm quickly during a crisis. When older babies get sick, they usually get well faster when they still receive their mother's milk.
- Your milk changes to meet the needs of your child as she grows.
- There are enzymes in breastmilk that help break down solid foods. In fact, the latest research shows that babies who continue to breastfeed as they start eating solid foods are much less likely to develop wheat allergy (also known as gluten intolerance or celiac disease) in adulthood.
- If you breastfeed through the first year your baby will never need formula and she can be weaned directly to whole cow's milk.
- Oxytocin, the "love" hormone, is released, throughout the course of breastfeeding, producing strong feelings of attachment between mother and baby, and easing both off to sleep after night time feeds.
- Babies and toddlers naturally get their sucking needs met during breastfeeding in a way that promotes normal tooth development. Bottle feeding can interfere with jaw development, making it more likely that braces will be needed later on.
- There are also continued health benefits for you, including lower risk of breast and ovarian cancer, diabetes, osteoporosis, heart disease and high blood pressure. In fact, the longer you nurse the greater the protection.

**Breastfeeding should continue for as long as comfortable, for you and your baby.**

- Breastfeeding will nurture trust and security in your older baby and toddler.
- The World Health Organization (WHO) and the United States Surgeon General recommend breastfeeding until age 2. The newest research shows that children, *and* their mothers, benefit from 2 or more years of breastfeeding.
- Normal weaning age varies by culture around the world. In the United States, we tend to wean our babies early, despite the many continued benefits. It is best to make this very personal decision about when to wean, based on the facts and how you are feeling about breastfeeding. You and your baby might be ready to wean at a year *or* earlier *or* want to continue through toddlerhood and beyond. It is safe to continue to breastfeed during pregnancy and to nurse an infant along with an older child. Trust that you will know when you are ready, and resist pressure from others to wean before you want to.
- The longer you breastfeed, the greater the benefits for you and your child.