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Wolters Kluwer

Patient education: Weaning from breastfeeding (The Basics)

[Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate](#)

What is weaning?

Weaning is when a woman stops breastfeeding. After babies are weaned, they no longer drink breast milk.

How long should I breastfeed before weaning?

Most doctors recommend breastfeeding your baby for at least 1 year (12 months). But you can continue to breastfeed for longer if you and your baby want to.

For the first 6 months of life, breast milk is the only food babies need. Most babies start eating other foods (in addition to breast milk) when they are 4 to 6 months old. These foods include infant cereal and mashed up vegetables, fruits, and meats. Babies should not drink juice or cow's milk until they are 1 year old.

When should I wean?

Women choose to stop breastfeeding at different times and for different reasons. Most of the time, the mother chooses when to wean. But sometimes, weaning happens because a baby no longer wants to breastfeed.

Some babies wean quickly. Other babies can take months to wean.

What if I want to stop breastfeeding but keep giving my baby breast milk?

If you want to do this, you can use a breast pump. This allows you to remove milk from your breasts so your baby can drink it from a bottle.

You might choose to start pumping if you return to work after having your baby. You might also pump if you need to be away from your baby for another reason, or just so another person can help with feedings. Pumping is a great way to keep giving your baby breast milk if you are not yet ready to wean.

How do I wean?

When you decide to wean, do not stop breastfeeding all at once. Instead, try to reduce your breastfeeding slowly. To do this, you can:

- Drop 1 breastfeeding session every 2 to 5 days
- Shorten each breastfeeding session
- Increase the time between breastfeeding sessions

Some women start to wean by stopping the daytime feedings first. They might still breastfeed at night or before bedtime. The night or bedtime feedings are usually the last feedings to be stopped.

Should I give my baby a bottle or cup when I wean?

You can give your baby a bottle or a cup. Most babies younger than 6 months old are weaned to a bottle. Most babies older than 1 year are weaned to a cup. Babies between 6 months old and 1 year old can be weaned to a bottle or a cup.

To help your baby's first bottle or cup feedings go smoothly, you can:

- Have someone else give your baby the bottle or cup
 - Give the bottle or cup before your baby gets too hungry
 - Put breast milk in the bottle or cup
 - Use a cup with 2 handles and a snap-on lid (if you use a cup)
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What breast problems can happen with weaning?

Different breast problems can happen with weaning. These include:

- Engorgement, which is when the breasts become too full of milk – This can cause the breasts to be swollen, hard, warm, and painful.
- Blocked milk duct – This can cause a red and painful breast lump ([picture 1](#)).
- Breast infection – This can cause a fever and a hard, red, and swollen area of the breast.

These problems are especially likely to happen if you stop breastfeeding all at once. If you need to wean all at once, there are things that you can do to prevent these problems. For example, you can use a breast pump or your hand to release some milk from your breasts ([figure 1](#)). You can do this a few times a day for a few days until your breasts stop hurting. If you do use a pump, be sure to use it for just a few minutes at a time. If you pump for longer, your body will continue to make more milk.

Breast problems from weaning are treated in different ways, depending on the problem. If you have any of the above symptoms or problems, let your doctor or nurse know.

How might my breasts change after weaning?

You might find that your breasts feel emptier and get smaller after weaning. You might also notice stretch marks on your breasts. But stretch marks usually fade over time.

After you stop breastfeeding, your breasts will stop making milk. But it can be normal to still have some milk in your breasts for months or years after weaning.

What if I feel sad or guilty when I wean?

It is normal to feel sad or guilty when you wean. Try to be gentle with yourself. No matter when you wean, remember that you have given your baby many important benefits through breastfeeding.

Weaning can also be hard for babies. It can help to give your baby extra love and attention during this time.

What if I have questions?

If you have any questions about breastfeeding or weaning, ask your doctor or nurse. You might also find it helpful to talk to a breastfeeding expert, called a "lactation consultant."

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[Patient education: Common breastfeeding problems \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Pumping breast milk \(The Basics\)](#)

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Topic 15829 Version 7.0

GRAPHICS

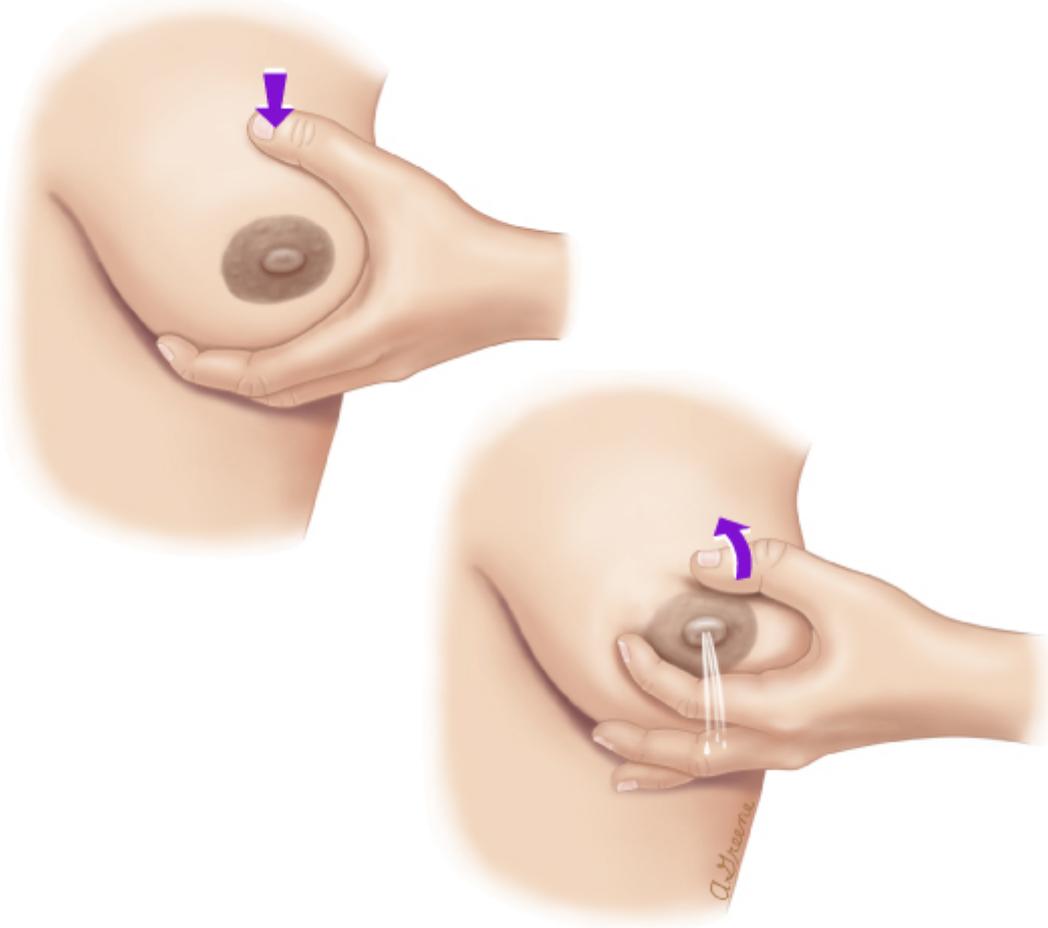
Blocked milk duct (galactocele)



Blocked or plugged ducts are areas of the breast where the flow of milk is blocked. They can stretch the nearby breast tissue and cause a painful breast lump (as shown by the arrow).

Graphic 70540 Version 6.0

Hand expression to release breast milk



Hold your hand in a c-shape, with your thumb on top. Press your thumb gently on your breast straight back into the chest. Then, roll your thumb and fingers toward the nipple. Breast milk should come out of the nipple. Keep doing this as you move your hand around the whole breast.

Graphic 73810 Version 5.0