

Weaning Encyclopedia Article

Weaning

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Contents

Weaning Encyclopedia Article.....	1
Contents.....	2
Weaning.....	3

Weaning

The process of decreasing breastfeeding and introducing other replacement forms of nutrition to a baby or toddler, such as bottlefeeding, cupfeeding, and solid foods.

Weaning can occur at widely varying ages, according to culture, family, and individual circumstances. The average age for weaning is 4.20 years worldwide, but in the United States babies are usually weaned after the first year, and quite often after only five or six months of age. A survey of mothers in the United States practicing extended breastfeeding reported an average weaning age of 2.75 years. Generally, exclusive **breastfeeding** is recommended for the first six months, and either formula or breast milk should constitute 75% of the babies' diet during at least the first year.

Weaning should be initiated at an otherwise non-stressful time, and should be done gradually over a period of months. Abrupt weaning is not recommended, because it is traumatic for the baby and may cause **depression** and breast mastitis in the mother. If for some reason breast milk becomes abruptly unavailable, a feeding tube should be introduced and the baby held in the familiar nursing position while feeding. To begin weaning, systematically eliminate feedings to no more than one feeding every three days. The process can be continued until feedings become rare and eventually stop.

An alternative to mother-led weaning is baby-led weaning, where breastfeeding continues until the baby voluntarily stops. The average age for baby-led weaning is about 2.50 years. A policy many mothers find successful is "don't offer and don't refuse." Mothers can start to offer liquids from a cup instead of offering the breast at feeding times unless the baby gives a clear signal that he or she wants to be breastfed. For babies over nine months the feeding can be replaced by solid food or drink. Reading, singing, or other close personal time can also be substituted for time usually spent breastfeeding.

With decreased stimulation of the breasts lactation should naturally diminish, but if breast engorgement should still occur, milk can be artificially expressed to reduce pressure. This, however, interferes with the weaning process and will prolong the period of lactation.

For Further Study

Books

Eisenberg, A., et al. *What to Expect the First Year*. New York: Workman Pub., 1989.

La Leche League International Staff, eds. *The Womanly Art of Breastfeeding: Thirty-Fifth Anniversary Edition*. New York: NAL-Dutton, 1991.