

How Long Should I Nurse My Baby?

Nursing for even a day is a precious gift you can give to your baby. But how long should you nurse? These guidelines may help you decide.

If you nurse for a few days: your baby will have received your colostrum, or early milk. Packed with nutrition and antibodies, it helps get your baby's digestive system going and gives him his first and easiest "immunization." Breastfeeding gives your baby a great start and helps your own body recover from the birth. Besides, taking time to relax and nurse is a lovely way to get to know your baby.

If you nurse for 4 to 6 weeks: you will ease your baby through the most critical part of infancy. Breastfed newborns are rarely sick or hospitalized and have few digestive problems. It takes four to six weeks to establish your milk supply and a good nursing relationship. If you nurse, your body will recover naturally from childbirth, and nursing mothers usually lose weight more easily! As an added bonus, prolactin, the "mothering hormone" that is produced every time you nurse, will help you and your baby form a special bond.

If you nurse for 3 to 4 months: your baby's digestive system will have matured a great deal, and he will be much better able to tolerate the foreign substances in commercial formulas. If there is a family history of allergies, you will greatly reduce his risk by waiting a few more months before adding anything at all to his diet of breast milk. And giving nothing but your milk for the first four months gives strong protection against ear infections for a whole year.

If you nurse for 6 months: you will continue to ensure your baby's good health by providing antibodies to all the bacteria and viruses to which you or your baby are exposed. One study indicates that continued nursing reduces the risk of both childhood and some adult cancers. At this point, he may be ready to try some other foods.

If you nurse for 9 months: you will have seen your baby through the fastest and most important brain and body development of his life on the food that was designed for him - your milk. Nursing for at least nine months will help ensure better performance through even the school years. Weaning may be fairly easy at this age... but then, so is nursing! If you want to avoid weaning this early, be sure you've been available to nurse for comfort as well as for food.

If you nurse for a year: you will have saved enough money to buy a major appliance! Your baby is now ready to try a whole range of new foods. This year of nursing has given your child many health benefits that will last his whole life. He will have a stronger immune system, for

example, and is less likely to need orthodontia or speech therapy. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends nursing for at least one year to ensure the best possible nutrition and health for your baby.

If you nurse past one year: you will continue to provide the highest quality nutrition and superb protection against illness at a time when infections are common. A toddler picks up everything! He is eating a variety of table foods and has had time to form a solid bond with you - a healthy starting point for his growing independence. Together you can work on the weaning process, progressing at a pace that he can handle. A former U.S. Surgeon General said, "it is a lucky baby... who continues to nurse until he's two."

If you nurse until your baby outgrows the need: you can feel confident that you have met your baby's physical and emotional needs in the most natural and healthy way possible. In cultures where there is no pressure to wean, children tend to nurse for at least two years. The World Health Organization and UNICEF strongly encourages breastfeeding through toddlerhood. Your milk provides antibodies and other protective substances as long as you continue to nurse. Families of nursing toddlers often find that their medical bills are lower for years to come.

Children who were nursed long-term tend to be very secure. Nursing can help ease both of you through the tears, tantrums, and tumbles of toddlerhood, while illnesses are milder and easier to handle. It is an all-purpose mothering tool that you won't want to be without! Don't worry that your child will nurse forever. All children eventually wean, no matter what you do, and there are more nursing toddlers around than you might guess.

Whether you nurse for a day or for several years, the decision to nurse your child is one you need never regret. And whenever weaning takes place, remember that it is a big step for both of you. If you choose to wean before your child is ready, be sure to do it gradually, and with love.

Adapted from an article by LLL leaders of New York Harvest 1998.