

Food Fact Sheet: Breastfeeding

This Food Fact Sheet provides information about how to breastfeed your baby. It explains the benefits of breastfeeding and where to go for support and further information. Exclusive breastfeeding is the best way to feed a baby from birth until 6 months of age.

Breastfeeding can be continued alongside the introduction of complementary foods at around six months of age. Take a look at the Complementary Feeding (weaning) food fact sheet at bda.uk.com/foodfacts Breastfeeding is encouraged until your baby is up to two years of age. There is limited evidence on the nutritional benefit of continued breastfeeding after two years of age.

Breastfeeding is encouraged for as long as you wish, for the ongoing health and well-being of you and your baby. The longer your baby is breastfed, the more they will benefit. Breastfeeding is not only for nourishment – it can also be used to comfort and calm your baby. Breastmilk is a free, sustainable resource containing all of the nutrition that a baby needs. It also has protective factors to help babies to grow and develop.

Benefits of breastfeeding

Breastmilk adapts to the changing needs of your baby as they grow and develop. Breastmilk contains antibodies, live cells, and other protective factors. These are produced by your body in response to your environment and are passed on to your baby in your breastmilk. These give your baby unique protection from their surroundings.

Babies who are not breastfed have a greater risk of ear, chest and gastrointestinal infections (and hospital admissions), constipation, eczema, allergies, childhood cancers, obesity, type 2 diabetes and other long term health conditions. Breastfed premature babies show lower rates of infections and necrotising enterocolitis. Sucking from the breast helps to develop the baby's mouth, teeth and jaw, as well as their long term physical development.

Mothers who breastfeed have a lower risk of developing breast and ovarian cancer and hip fractures. Mothers may also find it easier to regain their pre-pregnancy weight and spend less on feeding their baby as breastmilk is free, requiring no equipment.

When your baby is born

Holding your baby against your bare skin for as long as is comfortable can help you both feel calm and comforted. Skin-to-skin contact also keeps your baby warm and enables you to recognise your baby's feeding cues (e.g. turning head, stirring, licking lips, sucking hands). It also boosts prolactin, your milkmaking hormone. Feeding whenever your baby 'asks', however frequent, is known as baby-led, or demand feeding. Skin-to-skin can be enjoyed over the coming weeks and months too.

Early breastfeeding

No special preparation is needed to breastfeed, but learning about breastfeeding will help to build confidence. Nearly all women are able to breastfeed, but it is not always an easy process, and patience and education may be necessary. In the early days of breastfeeding you will produce colostrum. Colostrum is a very thick, concentrated breastmilk. It is produced in tiny drops and provides your baby with everything he/ she needs at that time. Some women find breastfeeding straightforward.

However, if you find that feeding is uncomfortable, painful or a terrible experience, your breasts are full and sore or your baby appears to want to feed constantly and is not gaining weight then it is really important that your baby is attaching to your breast well and you can recognise effective feeding before considering other possible causes. The UNICEF website has photos and videos showing optimal positioning, attachment and feeding. Your midwife, breastfeeding support worker and the national breastfeeding helplines and websites (below) can all help you to practise and learn how to do this so that you and your baby can both enjoy breastfeeding.

Try not to use artificial teats (bottles) and dummies when you are establishing breastfeeding as these can mask your baby's feeding signals and affect your ability to make milk. If you are concerned about this, speak to your midwife or health visitor.

How do I know my baby is breastfeeding well?

A baby who is breastfeeding well looks healthy. They will gain weight, thrive, and pass urine and open their bowels frequently. Young babies often feed between every two to four hours, and initial feeds can take longer. After a few weeks, feeding tends to settle into a more recognisable pattern, interrupted every now and again by more frequent feeding. These periods of more frequent feeding help to increase and sustain milk production as your baby grows, so don't worry if your pattern changes.

Expressing

Your hand or a manual/electronic pump can be used to express your breastmilk and be fed to your baby using a spoon, cup or bottle. By expressing your breastmilk, the mother's body gets a signal to produce more. It means the more milk the baby drinks, the more milk will be produced. This can help to stimulate breast-milk supply, to relieve engorgement (when your breasts are very full), to enable you to have a night out and manage returning to work. Your midwife or health visitor can show you how to do this when your baby is born.

Nutrition and breast-milk

Breastmilk is unique and meets a baby's nutritional requirements for the first 6 months of age. From six months of age, babies require additional nutrition provided by complementary foods, but breastmilk continues to be the main source of nutrients until 12 months of age.

Vitamins

Breastfed babies need vitamin D drops from birth. All children aged 6 months to 5 years need vitamin supplements containing vitamins A, C and D every day. Some babies are entitled to free Healthy Start vitamins. You can find out more from your doctor, midwife or health visitor. For more information, you can access the vitamin D food fact sheet at [bda.uk.com/foodfacts](https://www.bda.uk.com/foodfacts)

Important to consider

Some chemicals and substances consumed by breastfeeding mothers can be transferred to your baby through your breastmilk.

Some alcohol passes through the breastmilk to baby. If you drink alcohol, wait up to 2 hours before you breastfeed your baby. Some drinks that contain caffeine (coffee, tea, cola and energy drinks) may cause your baby to become irritable if you drink them in large amounts. Ask your doctor about any prescribable medication or non-prescribable vitamins, supplements or herbal preparations before taking them.

Cow's Milk Allergy

If your baby is diagnosed with Cow's Milk Protein Allergy, please seek advice from a health professional to see if you need to make any changes to your diet. Find out more in the BDA's Food Fact Sheet on Cow's Milk Allergy at [bda.uk.com/foodfacts](https://www.bda.uk.com/foodfacts)

Information and support

Local support and information for breastfeeding mothers is available from midwives, health visitors, trained breastfeeding peer supporters and/or breastfeeding counsellors at breastfeeding drop-ins and clinics. These are often held at Children's Centres and doctor's surgeries where you can also access Healthy Start vitamins. Trained breastfeeding counsellors are also available to answer any questions you may have on breastfeeding – see the helplines listed below.

Summary

Breastfeeding is the single most positive thing you can do to protect you and your baby's health. Breastfeeding should always be comfortable. If you experience discomfort, there is a lot of qualified help available either in person, online or via telephone helplines.