

Breastfeeding and Family Foods: Loving and Healthy

For the very best start in life, the World Health Organization (WHO) and health agencies recommend that mothers breastfeed their babies exclusively for the first six months, and continue breastfeeding together with other food and drink, up to two years or as long as mother and baby want to. In most households, babies older than 6 months and young children are fed with the same foods that are eaten by the rest of the family. This does not mean that at 6 months of age babies can move directly from exclusive breastfeeding to eating exactly the same meals as the rest of the family. Older babies and young children need to be given the most nutritious 'best bits' of the family's food, prepared to suit the child's eating abilities which means mashed, chopped, or softened. When carried out with love, care and patience, starting to feed other foods can be a time for extending and strengthening the mother-baby bond of breastfeeding, rather than ending it.

Breastfeeding continues to be important for children's nutrition, development and care after the first 6 months of life. Breastfed babies get more than half of their nutrition from breastmilk up to age 12 months and just under half until the age of two years. Breastmilk has protein, vitamins, minerals, essential fatty acids and protective factors. It provides more calories and nutrients than most of the other foods. If babies' stomachs are filled with too much of the other foods, they will take less breastmilk and their overall diet and health will be inferior. The challenge is how to feed other foods so that they add to the nutritional contribution of breastmilk, rather than replace it.

Here are some feeding tips while continuing to breastfeed:

- ***Start giving foods at 6 months.*** Breastfeed exclusively, meaning give no other food or drink, from birth to 6 months, then begin to give the tastes of other foods while continuing to breastfeed often and on demand. Start with food high in iron such as meats and iron- fortified infant cereal.
- ***Continue breastfeeding for 2 years or longer.*** Continue breastfeeding as often and for as long as you and your baby want to.
- ***Gradually increase the amount of food offered.*** Start with small amounts at 6 months and increase the amount offered as your child shows more interest, while still breastfeeding often. Let your child's appetite be your guide.
- ***Vary the consistency and variety of foods offered.*** Every child has different interests and ability to handle different textures and consistency. To begin with, babies need soft foods, but they soon learn to chew. By about 8 months babies can eat 'finger foods' – foods that they hold themselves. By about 12 months they can eat most family foods, cut into small pieces or softened as needed, but they should always have foods low in salt, sugar and fat.
- ***Protect health with variety.*** Give a wide variety of foods, as this will increase the chance of meeting vitamin and mineral needs. Breastfed babies will still need a vitamin D supplement, until they are getting enough from foods.
- ***Breastfeed more often during sickness.*** Sick babies may not feel like eating, but they usually want to breastfeed. Offer the nourishing, comforting and therapeutic breastmilk along with fluids and favorite foods often during illness. Growth and immune factors in breastmilk quickly repair the intestines after diarrhea.

Breastfeeding provides emotional and nutritional support for mothers and babies that is valuable and enjoyable well beyond 6 months of age.

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