



Up to what age can a baby stay well nourished by just being breastfed?

Q: Up to what age can a baby stay well nourished by just being breastfed?

A: Infants should be exclusively breastfed – i.e. receive only breast milk – for the first six months of life to achieve optimal growth, development and health. "Exclusive breastfeeding" is defined as giving no other food or drink – not even water – except breast milk. It does, however, allow the infant to receive drops and syrups (vitamins, minerals and medicines). Breast milk is the ideal food for the healthy growth and development of infants; breastfeeding is also an integral part of the reproductive process with important implications for the health of mothers.

WHO recommends that infants start receiving complementary foods at six months (180 days) of age in addition to breast milk. Complementary foods should be given 2–3 times a day between 6–8 months, increasing to 3–4 times a day between 9–11 months. Between 12–23 months of age, 3–4 meals should be given. In addition, depending on the child's appetite, 1–2 nutritious snacks can be offered between meals. These foods should be adequate, meaning that they provide sufficient energy, protein and micronutrients to meet a growing child's nutritional needs. Foods should be prepared and given in a safe manner to minimize the risk of contamination. Feeding young infants requires active care and stimulation to encourage the child to eat.

The transition from exclusive breastfeeding to full use of family foods is a very vulnerable period. It is the time when many infants become malnourished, contributing significantly to the high prevalence of malnutrition in children under five years of age worldwide. It is essential therefore that infants receive appropriate, adequate and safe complementary foods to ensure the right transition from the breastfeeding period to the full use of family foods.

Amounts of foods to offer

Age	Texture	Frequency	Amount at each meal
6–8 months	Start with thick porridge, well mashed foods Continue with mashed	2–3 meals per day, plus frequent breastfeeds Depending on the child's	Start with 2–3 tablespoonfuls per feed, increasing gradually to ½ of a 250 ml cup

	family foods	appetite, 1–2 snacks may be offered	
9–11 months	Finely chopped or mashed foods, and foods that baby can pick up	3–4 meals per day, plus breastfeeds Depending on the child's appetite, 1–2 snacks may be offered	½ of a 250 ml cup/bowl
12–23 months	Family foods, chopped or mashed if necessary	3–4 meals per day, plus breastfeeds Depending on the child's appetite, 1–2 snacks may be offered	¾ to full 250 ml cup/bowl

Note: If baby is not breastfed, give in addition: 1–2 cups of milk per day, and 1–2 extra meals per day.