

Breastfeeding a toddler: What to expect

Are you considering breastfeeding your baby into toddlerhood and wondering how the breastfeeding relationship will change? Are you wondering if your toddler is trying to wean, or why your toddler is suddenly nursing round the clock? Following are a few observations on typical toddler nursing behavior. As always, the way your particular baby approaches nursing will depend on his or her own unique personality.

How long do breastfeeding sessions last?

It is normal for breastfeeding sessions to get shorter as baby gets older - this doesn't necessarily mean that baby is weaning. As baby gets older he can transfer milk more efficiently, so breastfeeding sessions may become shorter. Another factor that comes into play is distraction - baby gets so interested in his environment that he doesn't like to take the time to breastfeed. A typical toddler breastfeeding session may last only a couple of minutes - just enough time to take a sip and reconnect with mom for a moment before running off to do toddler things. Breastfeeding sessions at naptime, nighttime, and upon waking usually last longer, since baby is usually sleepy and not as intent on jumping into the middle of things.

How often do toddlers breastfeed?

Breastfeeding frequency for toddlers is usually erratic and varies greatly from child to child. It is normal for toddlers to be interested in everything around them and, thus your toddler may be too distracted to breastfeed at times. At other times, baby may be so focused on the big developmental changes within himself that he will want to spend lots of time at the breast to reconnect with mom and adjust to all the new skills in his life. Some children breastfeed often ("like a newborn" is a comment frequently heard from the moms of 12-15 month olds), some breastfeed only once or twice a day, and some breastfeed a few times a day on some days and frequently on others. No matter what the pattern, average breastfeeding frequency decreases gradually as baby gets older. Once or twice daily breastfeeding can continue for months and even years, depending upon the child and mother.

Toddlers breastfeed for comfort, in addition to nutrition. Breastfeeding can work wonders when baby is hurt, sad, upset (nursing is a great tantrum-tamer), or sick. Toddlers may also use breastfeeding as a quick way of "checking in" and reconnecting with mom throughout the day.

Your toddler may go through phases of increased nighttime breastfeeding. Common reasons for this include teething, decreased breastfeeding during the day because of distraction, developmental advances, illness, or reconnecting with mom.

It is typical for a toddler to breastfeed more often when traveling away from home, or when there are other big changes in the typical day-to-day routine. To toddlers, breastfeeding is warmth, comfort, reassurance... it's their "home away from home" that they tend to retreat to when things are unfamiliar or uncertain. Once you are back at home and settled in, or once your child has adjusted to the change (regardless of what it was), the increased breastfeeding tends to fall by the wayside.

What breastfeeding positions work best for toddlers?

Positioning simply depends upon what is comfortable for you and your child, and will evolve as your child gets older. Positioning (and sometimes latch) most always get rather casual over time, and as long as this works for you and your child it is not a problem. However, sometimes mom will get sore nipples or may feel baby's top teeth. In these cases, it's a good idea to look into making some changes in positioning or latch.

Acrobatic breastfeeding

By toddlerhood, most babies have quite a repertoire of creative breastfeeding positions. Acrobatic breastfeeding is typical and it's common for baby to try nursing upside down, with feet in the air, standing on one foot, wiggling and twisting and turning, and so on. Enjoy the silly positions they try, be flexible and patient, but if the acrobatic breastfeeding gets to be a problem, here are tips that have helped other mothers:

- Give it a little time. Exhibits of the most intense acrobats are generally a phase that shows up when baby figures out that he can nurse in a million different positions (and what's more, it's fun to try!). The novelty will wear off after a little time and the acrobatics will decrease.
- Give baby something to hold and play with while breastfeeding (a small toy, perhaps). Some moms wear a bright scarf or necklace to focus baby's attention on something other than acrobatics.
- Talk or read a book to your child while you breastfeed. Songs or fingerplays may also help.
- Try a firm reprimand. Say something like "Be still" in a firm voice; don't raise your voice, as you don't want to scare baby. You might also hug baby close to you to reiterate the point.
- Stop the feeding if baby continues with the acrobatics. Say something like "I can't nurse you when you're squirmy. Let's go play and get the wiggles out and we will nurse in a little while." Then play for a few minutes before offering to breastfeed again.

- Another version of stopping the feeding: Warn baby that if he doesn't be still, mommy's not going to nurse. And then stop the feeding if he persists. Get up, put him down, and explain again why you stopped. Tell him that if and when he can be still, mommy will nurse again.
- Breastfeeding in public is sometimes a problem when baby is really wiggly. If the acrobatics are too much for breastfeeding in public, try to feed baby before leaving and tell baby that you'll nurse as soon as you get home (or to the car, etc.); delaying breastfeeding like this works better when baby is over 18 months and is not overtired. If your toddler is fussing and will not settle down to breastfeed, you might try offering a snack or a sip from a cup while you're out.

If I nurse past a year, will it be harder to wean?

Many mothers have been told, "If you don't wean now, you'll *never* be able to!" It is not uncommon for mothers to wean at a year (or before) -- even when neither mom nor baby *want* to wean yet -- due to the *mistaken* impression that the only two choices are to wean by a year or keep nursing till age 5!

Nursing past a year does NOT make it impossible or even more difficult to wean later on. If you feel that you would like to initiate mother-led weaning at any point, then you can certainly do so. Age has much less to do with ease of weaning than does your child's developmental readiness for weaning. Each child has his own developmental timeline for child-led weaning - the age that a child is ready to self-wean varies greatly from child to child and commonly ranges from age 2 through age 4 (though it is normal to see children on either end of this range). If mom initiates weaning, the closer the child is to weaning on his own, the easier it will be (for both mom and child) to accelerate this natural progression.

What is child-led weaning like?

Child-led weaning occurs when a child no longer has a need to breastfeed - nutritionally or emotionally. It is relatively unusual for a baby younger than 18-24 months to self-wean if they are not being encouraged in that direction (though things like mom's pregnancy may also affect the timing).

A child who is self-weaning will almost always cut down on breastfeeding very *gradually* over a period of months, one session at a time (anything abrupt is most always a strike). Many children will continue with only a nighttime, morning or naptime breastfeeding session (or a combination of these) for months before weaning. When a child self-weans, he will also have been drinking well from a cup and getting the vast majority of his nutrition from solid foods for some time.

A typical story of self-weaning might proceed like this (keep in mind that each child will have his or her own unique weaning story): For months your child may breastfeed mainly at naps, night and waking. Then your toddler may stop napping regularly, so the naptime breastfeeding session is cut out. A couple of months later, he may start falling asleep after (or during) bedtime reading with Dad, so another breastfeeding session is cut out. A month or so later he may wake up and want to eat breakfast or play and will be too busy to breastfeed in the morning for a few days. One day you realize that your toddler hasn't nursed in a week. He may breastfeed occasionally, then at some point you count back and realize that it's been weeks since your child last breastfeed -- he has weaned!

Helpful Resources

- Bumgarner NJ. *Mothering Your Nursing Toddler*, 3rd revised ed. Schaumburg, Illinois: La Leche League International, 2000.
- La Leche League International. *The Womanly Art of Breastfeeding*, 7th revised ed. Schaumburg, Illinois: La Leche League International, 2004.
- Bengson D. *How Weaning Happens*. Schaumburg, Illinois: La Leche League International, 1999.
- Flower H. *Adventures in Tandem Nursing: Breastfeeding during pregnancy and beyond*. Schaumburg, Illinois: La Leche League International, 2003.
- *Nursing After the First Year* at kellymom.com: <http://www.kellymom.com/bf/bfextended/> Includes information on the benefits of breastfeeding past the first year, extended breastfeeding myths, nursing manners, handling criticism, nutrition for nursing toddlers, and more.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends:

"Breastfeeding should be continued for at least the first year of life and beyond for as long as mutually desired by mother and child... Increased duration of breastfeeding confers significant health and developmental benefits for the child and the mother... There is no upper limit to the duration of breastfeeding and no evidence of psychologic or developmental harm from breastfeeding into the third year of life or longer."

-- American Academy of Pediatrics Section on Breastfeeding. *Breastfeeding and the Use of Human Milk*. Pediatrics. Feb 2005;115(2): 496-50.