

HEALTHY DRINKS. HEALTHY KIDS.

Healthy Beverage Consumption in Early Childhood

Recommendations from Key National Health
and Nutrition Organizations



Healthy Drinks, Healthy Kids

Research shows that what children drink – from birth through age 5 – can have a big impact on their health. That’s why some of the nation’s leading experts on health and nutrition developed recommendations to help parents and caregivers choose what’s best for kids. The full recommendations can be found at healthydrinkshealthykids.org. This brief provides more details about [breastfeeding](#).¹

All about breastfeeding

For the first 6 months of life, babies need only breast milk and/or infant formula. Breast milk provides nearly all of the nutrients needed for optimal growth,² and also strengthens your baby’s immune system. As a baby grows, the composition of the mother’s breast milk changes to meet baby’s nutritional needs.

Until 12 months of age, breast milk and/or infant formula continue to be your baby’s most important source of nourishment, even as solid foods are introduced gradually during this time. Babies may be ready for solid food between 4 and 6 months of age if they have good head control and show [other signs of developmental readiness](#).

How long should I breastfeed my child?

Breastfeeding is recommended until your baby is at least 12 months old. If you and your baby want to continue breastfeeding beyond that point, that’s great – go for it! The frequency and length of breastfeeding sessions typically decrease quite a bit as your child consumes more solid food.

If children >12 months of age are still breastfeeding, is it necessary for them to drink whole milk too?

Two to three cups of whole milk per day are recommended for children ages 12-24 months. The average amount of calories and total fat in breast milk and whole milk are similar, ounce for ounce, so any combination of breast milk and whole milk (up to 2-3 cups/day in total) is appropriate between ages 12-24 months. It may be difficult to determine how much breast milk a child is consuming unless the breast milk is expressed and fed from a cup. Keep in mind that after 12 months, you should begin to discontinue bottle use.

By the time a child is two years old, most nutrition is delivered through solid foods offered on a typical eating schedule of meals and snacks. If a child is still breastfeeding at this age, solid foods should be offered before breast milk. Discuss with your child’s pediatrician if you have specific questions or concerns about your child’s intake of breast milk.

¹ The expert panel that developed the recommendations did not address breast milk or infant formula. Recommendations in these areas vary by the infant’s age, weight, and developmental milestones, and are generally well understood and widely accepted. The breastfeeding information in this brief is based on a prior Healthy Eating Research report, [Feeding guidelines for infants and young toddlers: A responsive parenting approach](#).

² It is recommended that exclusively breastfed infants receive a daily supplement of vitamin D (400 IU), because this vitamin is low in breast milk. Infant formulas are fortified with vitamin D, but if your baby consumes less than 1 liter per day of formula, your doctor may advise a vitamin D supplement for your baby.

Should my child have any other beverage besides breast milk or infant formula in the first year?

During the first year of a child's life the only beverages s/he needs is breast milk or infant formula and a small amount of water once solid foods are introduced. Infants younger than 12 months do not need any other beverages and should not drink juice, milk, flavored milks, toddler milks, plant-based/non-dairy milks, drinks with caffeine, low-calorie sweetened drinks (such as "diet" or "light" drinks), or sugar-sweetened drinks (such as soda, fruit drinks and fruit flavored drinks, fruit-ades, sports drinks, energy drinks, sweetened waters, and sweetened coffee and tea drinks).

From 6-12 months of age, a total of 1/2 to 1 cup (4-8 ounces) per day of plain, fluoridated drinking water may be offered in an open, strawed, or sippy cup during meal times. This drinking water is not intended to replace any amount of breast milk or infant formula, and practically speaking, it is unlikely that much of this drinking water will be swallowed as many infants ages 6-12 months are still developing cup-drinking skills. This practice is suggested to help your baby get familiar with the taste of plain water.

For 0- to 12-month-olds, dairy milks should not be offered as a substitute for breast milk or infant formula; nor should plant milks/non-dairy beverages (e.g., commercially prepared soy-based infant formula) unless prescribed by your pediatrician for special dietary needs such as allergies. These milks are not designed to meet the nutritional needs of your child to the same extent as breast milk or infant formula. Furthermore, use of alternative beverages as a major component of the diet during this period has been associated with malnutrition.

Does adding cereal to a bottle help babies sleep better?

Only breast milk or formula should be fed with a bottle to babies. It is not recommended to mix cereal with formula or breast milk in a bottle. There is no evidence that this helps babies sleep longer and some research has linked this practice with an increased risk of child obesity. In addition, mixing cereal with formula or breast milk in a bottle may be a choking hazard, and it may interfere with how well nutrients in breast milk or formula are absorbed.

A note about bottle size

Be cautious about the volume of formula or expressed breast milk given at each feed. Studies have shown that bottle size matters. The bigger the bottle used, the more likely the baby will be to consume more than needed.

I have other questions!

For more information about breastfeeding, check out:

- [Feeding Guidelines for Infants and Young Toddlers: A Responsive Feeding Approach](#)
- [Breastfeeding information from the American Academy of Pediatrics](#)
- [Frequently Asked Questions about breastfeeding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)

Thirsty for more?

Visit healthydrinkshealthykids.org to find more information on other drinks such as:

- Water
- Juice
- Milk
- Plant-Based, Non-Dairy Milk
- Toddler Milk
- Sugar-Sweetened Beverages

Healthy
Eating
Research

These recommendations were developed by experts at the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics (AND), the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry (AAPD), and the American Heart Association (AHA) under the leadership of Healthy Eating Research (HER) with funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.