

Health Article

# What to know about supplementing with formula for your baby

Parents may introduce formula to their baby's diet for personal or medical reasons. A lactation consultant explains how supplementing with formula can support your nursing goals.

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By Paula Kehoe

Breastmilk offers incredible benefits for babies. It can protect them against infections and illness, while promoting a healthy weight. It also offers many health benefits for nursing parents. The World Health Organization recommends exclusive nursing for the first six months. And then continuing to nurse for up to two years or longer.

But some parents may choose to supplement with formula for many medical or personal reasons, says Taya Griffin. Griffin is a Toronto-based International Board Certified Lactation Consultant who offers virtual visits through Well.ca Services. We spoke to her on how to help parents supplement with formula while they continue to work on nursing.

## What are the signs a baby needs formula?

If you have concerns about your baby's weight or nursing behaviours, you should speak to your pediatrician. According to Griffin, here are warning signs to watch for:

- Baby is losing weight. Most newborns lose a small amount of weight in the first few days after birth. But they should gain it back by the second week. "If a baby is steadily losing weight while mom is working hard on breastfeeding. And mom still isn't producing enough milk even while pumping, the baby will need formula," Griffin says.
- Newborn is hungry. If colostrum or milk aren't coming in, formula can help until you can get professional help, Griffin says.
- Supply and latch issues. If your baby isn't latching well, your breast/chest won't drain during feeds. This can lead to a decrease in milk production and other issues. Griffin says a lactation consultant will work with parents to correct latch problems.

## Is it okay to supplement a breastfed baby's diet with formula?

Giving your baby formula in addition to breast/chest milk is completely fine. Formula contains nutrients and vitamins babies need to grow and develop.

Griffin says for many parents, there can be feelings of guilt and shame associated with formula feeding. But she reassures that a happy and healthy baby is a well-fed baby, whether nursed or formula fed.

"Introducing formula to your baby's diet is one way to make sure they are getting enough," says Griffin. This can give you time to establish your milk supply and production.

If you give your baby small amounts of formula regularly it would be best to pump. If you don't, it can lead to reduction in your milk supply, says Griffin. That's why it's key to resume full nursing as soon as possible, if that is your goal. Remember to only pump right after a feed rather than in between or before breast/chest feeds.

## I'm considering supplementing with formula. Who should I talk to?

If your baby is struggling to gain weight, your pediatrician may recommend trying a few things. This includes supplementing with formula.

However, Griffin says it's important for nursing parents to continue to nurse their babies. And to speak to a lactation professional for guidance on how to maximize milk production and offer bottles.

"Just because your baby isn't getting enough milk at the breast, doesn't necessarily mean that you don't have enough milk. There could be many reasons. Like your baby is not latching well on to your breast. Or your baby is tongue-tied. This can prevent them from getting the milk out of the breast and into their body."

## Before you try supplementing with formula

Before you add formula to the mix, see a lactation consultant. They can work with you to help your baby get access to more breast/chest milk. This can include:

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"Some women may try herbal therapy and prescription medication to re-establish their milk supply. This might actually help them avoid giving the baby formula," she says.

### How to supplement and the best ways to introduce formula

If you need to use supplementary feeding for your baby, bottles aren't your only option. Another method Griffin suggests is using a feeding tube. This tube can be inserted into your baby's mouth while they nurse. This way they get breast/chest milk at the same time as they receive formula.

"A mom can give her baby 50 per cent breastmilk and 50 per cent formula but all at the breast with the help of a tube," Griffin says. "There is so much more to breastfeeding than breastmilk alone."

### Maintaining your milk supply while giving formula

Sometimes perseverance is all you need to keep your milk flowing, Griffin says. "If you want to maintain your milk supply while giving your baby formula, you'll need to breastfeed or pump regularly."

### Can you mix breastmilk and formula?

Griffin cautions against combining breastmilk with formula. "If you mix your milk with formula and the baby doesn't finish the milk, then some of your breast milk goes down the drain," Griffin says. "Formula doesn't last as long as breastmilk. You have to discard it after each feeding, which isn't a big deal compared to breastmilk. Breastmilk can be refrigerated for another feed."

Griffins says instead, feed your baby the pumped breast/chest milk first. If he or she still seems hungry, offer the formula.

### Where to get help if you have problems with nursing and formula feeding

Griffins recommends talking to your pediatrician and reaching out to an experienced lactation consultant. "To give your baby the maximum amount of breastmilk, it's important to see someone who has a knowledgeable background in breastfeeding," she says.


*Written in consultation with Taya Griffin, International Board Certified Lactation Consultant, at [Well.ca Services](#) and [www.tayagriffin.com](#).*

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Taya Griffin, Lactation Consultant



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