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Feeding your baby formula: Before you start

Human milk (breast milk) is the only food a baby needs for the first 6 months of their life. It's recommended that babies continue to be offered human milk until 2 years of age or older.

Parents may give their baby formula for a number of reasons. If offering infant formula to your baby:

- Choose store-bought infant formula made from cow milk
- Choose soy-based store-bought infant formula if your baby has a medical condition called galactosemia (g-lak-toh-see-me-ah) or does not drink dairy for religious or cultural reasons
- Start to offer solid foods when your baby is around 6 months of age
- Continue offering formula until your baby is 9 to 12 months of age
- Introduce pasteurized, homogenized (3.25% M.F.) cow milk at 9 to 12 months of age, if your baby is eating a variety of iron-rich foods

Do not feed homemade infant formula, evaporated milk, lower fat cow milk, other animal milk or plant-based milks to your baby. They do not provide the complete nutrition your baby needs to grow and develop and are not safe alternatives to human milk or infant formula.

If you have questions about what to feed your baby, contact your health care provider, a public health nurse or a lactation consultant. You can also call HealthLinkBC at **8-1-1** to speak with a registered nurse or registered dietitian.

What are the different types of formula?

There are 3 types of store-bought formula: ready-to-feed liquid, liquid concentrate and powdered. Ready-to-feed and liquid concentrate are sterile (free from germs) until they are opened. Powdered formula is not sterile.

You can buy infant formula at most grocery stores and pharmacies. When using formula, remember to:

- Follow the instructions on the label
- Never dilute the formula with extra water
- Never use formula from a container with dents, bulges or other damage
- Use the formula before the expiration date

What type of formula can I offer my baby?

Healthy babies born at full term, which is 37 weeks or more of pregnancy, can be fed any type of store-bought formula: ready-to-feed, liquid concentrate or powdered. If you use powdered formula, prepare it carefully.

Some babies have a higher risk of getting sick from powdered infant formula. This includes babies who:

- Were born premature, before 37 weeks of pregnancy, and are under 2 months of age (corrected age)
- Weighed less than 2500 grams at birth and are under 2 months of age
- Have a weakened immune system, meaning they are more likely to get sick if exposed to germs

The safest option for these babies is ready-to-feed or liquid concentrate formulas because they are sterile. If not available, use carefully prepared powdered infant formula instead.

If you're not sure what type of formula to feed your baby, discuss with your health care provider.

What do I need to make formula?

You will need the following items to make formula:

- Bottles, rings, nipples, discs, caps
- Tongs, mixing utensils, can opener (if needed)
- Food thermometer (for powdered formula)
- Large pot or kettle
- Safe drinking water (for liquid concentrate and powdered formula)

If you do not have a safe source of drinking water, use ready-to-feed formula. You can also make liquid concentrate or powdered formula using bottled water with an unopened seal. If you're not sure if your water is safe, check with your health authority contact.

How do I prepare the bottles and equipment to make formula?

Wash your hands with soap and warm water. Wash bottles and equipment thoroughly with soap and water, then disinfect with boiling water. Disinfecting kills germs that could make your baby sick.

Artificial nipples wear down over time. Throw away nipples that are cracked, sticky, torn, discoloured or if the hole gets larger and the formula drips out quickly. New disposable bottle liners are sterile and ready to use. Use a new liner for every feed.

How do I bottle-feed my baby?

- Cuddle or hold your baby close. Make feeding a special time. Smile, talk, sing to your baby
- Your baby's head should be higher than their body. Support your baby's head to make it easier for them to swallow
- Let your baby decide how much to drink. Do not rush them or force them to finish the bottle
- Hold the bottle so most of the nipple is in your baby's mouth
- Tilt the bottle just a little, keeping it almost flat. It's easier for your baby to manage the flow of formula. Some air in the nipple will not cause a problem for your baby
- Gently burp your baby after feeding. Burping half-way through feeding may help with gas
- Do not prop the bottle or put your baby to bed with a bottle. This can cause your baby to drink too much or too little and can also cause choking, ear infections and tooth decay (cavities)

How often should I feed my baby?

By their second day, most babies feed at least 8 times in 24 hours (one day). This does not mean they feed every 3 hours. Timing between feeds may vary. Over time, the number of feeds will decrease and there will be more time in between feeds. Your baby may want to feed during the night. This is normal.

Feed your baby when you notice early signs of hunger. For example, your baby may:

- Bring their hands to their mouth
- Open their mouth, yawn or make lip-smacking sounds
- Turn their head toward the person holding them, often with their mouth open (called rooting)
- Make fists over their chest or belly

Once you start feeding, use the bottle within 2 hours. Throw out any leftover formula. Do not refrigerate a partly used bottle.

How much should I feed my baby?

Let your baby decide how much to drink at each feed. Every baby is different. In the first few days, your baby's stomach is small and they may only need small amounts of formula. As they grow, they may drink more at each feed. The amount your baby drinks can change each day.

Stop feeding when your baby shows you they are full. For example, your baby may:

- Close their mouth
- Slow down or stop sucking. Your baby may still have small sucking movements after a feed. This is normal behaviour
- Turn their head away from the bottle or the person feeding them
- Show a lack of interest in feeding
- Fall asleep

Your baby is getting enough formula if they're growing well and have 6 or more wet diapers a day by the time they're one week of age. If you're concerned that your baby is not feeding enough, contact your health care provider.

For more information

- HealthLinkBC File #69b Feeding your baby formula: Safely making and storing formula
- Infant formula: What you need to know