

## Breastfeeding your Toddler

### What is Extended Breastfeeding?

There is no strict definition of when breastfeeding becomes 'extended', although the term is commonly used to refer to breastfed babies over a year old. However, given the low breastfeeding duration rates in the UK today, the term could realistically be used for any breastfeeding after around six months.

### Why continue to breastfeed an older baby?

The most recent recommendations from the World Health Organisation, UNICEF and the UK Department of Health are that babies should be exclusively breastfed for at least six months, with breastfeeding continuing with the introduction of suitable complementary foods for up to two years and beyond.

- Extended breastfeeding benefits your baby nutritionally and emotionally.
- Extended breastfeeding is beneficial to maternal health.
- Many benefits are dose related which means more breastfeeding, better benefits.

### Nutritional Benefits

In the same way that the composition of breastmilk changes during a feed or during the day, it also changes over the weeks and months. Breastmilk continues to be a valuable source of nutrients even when your child is eating a full and varied diet.

When your toddler is ill or teething, is likely to be refusing other foods and drinks. So it's particularly comforting to know that, by breastfeeding, you are not only providing a source of comfort, as well as a vital source of fluids and nutrition.

### Immunological Benefits

Breastfed toddlers get ill less often. When they do get ill, they tend to cope better and recover from the illness more quickly. The immunological benefits of breastfeeding, although incredibly important in those vital first weeks, continue to have a positive impact on your child's health for as long as you continue to breastfeed and for many years afterwards.

Studies have shown that many of the immune factors passed on through your breastmilk actually increase in concentration in the second year. A child's immune system develops very slowly and isn't completely mature until around the age of six, so extended breastfeeding will offer vital protection through this vulnerable stage of development.

Linked to this is the role that breastfeeding plays in the prevention of allergies, including asthma, eczema and food intolerances. Exclusive breastfeeding until at least six months, followed by continued breastfeeding alongside other complementary foods for as long as possible has been shown, by many studies, to be the most effective ways of protecting your child from developing allergies.

It is particularly important to bear this in mind if there is a history of allergies or intolerances in your family, as these conditions are often inherited. You may be saving yourself and your child a lot of trouble in the future if you invest in a long term breastfeeding relationship.

## Psychological Benefits

Emotionally, breastfeeding is an invaluable source of comfort and stability and a haven for many toddlers experiencing the frustrations and upsets associated with this difficult time in their young lives.

It is not true that breastfeeding on demand will 'spoil' a baby or that extended breastfeeding will produce a clingy, dependent child. In fact, the opposite has been shown to be true. By giving toddlers this unrestricted and constant source of security, you are providing them with the ideal base from which to explore the world and build their own independence.

Your breastfeeding toddler trusts you to always be there for them whenever they are feeling cross or tired or stressed. It is only through meeting completely these early dependence needs that your child will be able to grow secure in their own independence.

## Other benefits for your baby

There are many other dose-dependent benefits associated with breastfeeding, including:

- A reduced risk of becoming obese as an adult.
- Improving cognitive development.

## Benefits for mum

There are also many physical benefits that extended feeding offers a mother. For example, studies have found a significant inverse relation between breastfeeding duration and certain types of cancer. This means that the earlier you give up, the higher your chances in the future will be of contracting breast, ovarian, uterine or endometrial cancers. The longer you continue to breastfeed, the more the risk is reduced.

Breastfeeding also helps to protect mums against osteoporosis. While breastfeeding, you are likely to experience a small reduction of bone mineral; your bone mineral density across your whole body may decrease by around 1-2%. When you eventually stop breastfeeding, you gain back this reduction but your body can actually build you back stronger than you were to start with, meaning that many mums will actually have a higher bone mineral density than before they started.

Other benefits for mum may include:

- A delay in the return of fertility and menstruation, due to suppressed ovulation.
- A tendency to lose weight more easily.

*"My youngest daughter showed little interest in other foods until she was about 11 months old and, even now, won't sit down and eat a full meal. It's reassuring to know that by continuing to breastfeed I am providing her with an excellent source of nutrients."*

*"Many mums I know worry that by continuing to feed their babies into toddlerhood that they will somehow be 'tied' to their child and have to sacrifice an element of personal freedom. I don't agree. Many toddlers I know who are still breastfed enjoy only one or two feeds a day, normally in the morning and/or just before bed. These feeds are enjoyable and useful for the parents too, allowing an extra hour or so feeding and dozing in bed in the morning and offering a peaceful and easy way to help your child fall asleep in the evening."*

## Natural Weaning

*"When I was pregnant I was aiming to breastfeed for about three months. I don't think I even had a concept of a breastfeeding toddler. I'm really glad that I continued and weaning from*

*the breast was a very gradual process. There are more mums who have breastfed older babies and toddlers than you think."*

Children will naturally wean themselves from the breast and sometimes towards the end of breastfeeding, they only feed once a day or even less often.

**ABA booklets available from the ABM:**

Breastfeeding through pregnancy and beyond

**Association of Breastfeeding Mothers  
Helpline 0300 330 5453**

Admin and enquiries: 08444 122948

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