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Is breastfeeding for me? The pros and cons of breastmilk and formula

Deciding whether to breastfeed or formula-feed isn't an easy decision. For some, breastfeeding is enjoyable and practical, but this isn't the case for all mums - and feeding your baby with formula may be an easier, more comfortable option.

Ultimately, how you feed your baby is a personal decision with no right or wrong answer - you need to find the healthiest choice for you and your baby. Here are the pros and cons of both breastfeeding and formula-feeding.

Your work, lifestyle and personal preference will all influence whether you [breastfeed](#) or formula-feed your baby. The most important thing is for all parents to be able to make an informed choice that suits their needs. Despite this, many mums feel under pressure to breastfeed, which can contribute to low mood, [anxiety](#) and feelings of guilt and shame if they can't breastfeed or decide not to¹.

Joanna Daniels, breastfeeding and infant feeding engagement lead at the [National Childbirth Trust](#), says: "Parents are best placed to make feeding decisions that are right for them and their families.

"Their decisions can be affected by their financial circumstances, employment arrangements, the experiences and support they receive from friends and family, as well as the social and political context around them," she says.

"They need access to evidence-based, non-judgemental information and support, free from commercial bias," she adds.

Pros of breastfeeding

Breastfeeding is free

The cost of bottles and formula can be expensive, whereas breast milk is free. It's also ready when you've had your baby and doesn't need to be prepared. However, other breastfeeding-related items - like clothes and underwear designed to make nursing easier or breast pumps if you want to express your breast milk- can be costly.

Health benefits for you and your baby

[Breast milk](#) contains all the proteins, fats, vitamins and minerals needed to help your baby grow, develop and stay healthy, plus antibodies to fight germs². It helps to boost your baby's [immune system](#), prevents infections and promotes the development of a healthy digestive system.

Premature babies also benefit from breast milk, as research shows it offers protection against potentially fatal conditions including [sepsis](#) and necrotising enterocolitis³.

Research suggests breastfeeding lowers the risk of [breast cancer](#) and [ovarian cancer](#)⁴.

Cons of breastfeeding

Breastfeeding can be difficult

Breastfeeding may be easy and hassle-free for some new mums, but for many, it can be a difficult learning curve. Some mums may have a low milk supply and babies can have problems [latching](#) on to the nipple. [Mastitis](#), an inflammation of breast tissue that sometimes involves an infection, can be very painful.

If you want to breastfeed, it's important to get help from your midwife, health visitor or GP. You might also want to try a lactation consultant, or you can access help and support from the charity [Tommy's](#), the [National Breastfeeding Helpline](#) or the [National Childbirth Trust](#).

Breastfeeding is time-consuming

Newborns need to feed frequently, which can be difficult if you need to return to work - although you can try expressing milk to be fed to your baby via a bottle while you are busy.

You'll also need to keep an eye on your [alcohol](#) and caffeine intake and any medications you are taking, as these can be passed to your baby via breast milk. When you're [breastfeeding](#), there is also no way of measuring how much your baby is eating.

Pros of formula feeding

Someone else can feed your baby

One of the positives of formula-feeding is that other people can feed your [baby](#). This means partners can do nighttime feeds and there is less pressure on you. It also means they get to enjoy feeding time and share the bonding experience.

Formula-fed babies feed less frequently

Babies on formula don't need to feed as often as breastfed babies, as they tend to consume larger amounts in a single sitting. You can also see how much your baby is feeding at each feed, which can be helpful if you're concerned about their feeding habits or their growth.

You don't need to change your diet

What you consume – such as alcohol or medication – could be passed to your baby through breast milk. This means that if your baby has an intolerance or allergy such as a [cow's milk protein allergy](#) – which is common in children – you will need to cut dairy out of your diet.

However, you can give them a specialist formula that is suitable for their allergy without having to change your own diet.

Cons of formula feeding

Formula can be expensive

Bottles, formula and sterilisation equipment can be expensive. Also, you need to mix and prepare formula to the correct temperature and consistency, whereas breast milk doesn't need any preparation.

Formula can cause digestive issues

Formula is harder to digest than breast milk, so it can cause issues like wind or [constipation](#). However, breastfed babies can still struggle with wind or become constipated.

Formula may not provide the same health benefits

Modern formulas provide your baby with the nutrients they need to grow and develop, but they may not provide the same level of protection against infections and diseases as breast milk.

However, it's important to consider the health benefits of breast milk in a wider context, taking into account the fact that breastfeeding is difficult and may not be practical for all.

If breastfeeding is causing you [stress](#) and [anxiety](#) or is affecting your mood, both you and your baby may benefit from switching to formula. If you still want to [breastfeed](#), you should seek professional advice and support so you can continue while staying healthy and happy.

Further reading

1. [Priory: Majority of parents believe problems breastfeeding contribute to depression.](#)
2. [Ballard et al: Human milk composition: nutrients and bioactive factors.](#)
3. [Johnson et al: Economic benefits and costs of human milk feedings: a strategy to reduce the risk of prematurity-related morbidities in very-low-birth-weight infants.](#)
4. [Stordal: Breastfeeding reduces the risk of breast cancer: A call for action in high-income countries with low rates of breastfeeding.](#)

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