

COMBINATION FEEDING: WHAT IS IT? FACTSHEET

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DEFINITION

Combination feeding involves feeding an infant with both breastmilk from the breast and either expressed breast milk or formula milk from a bottle¹.

Why is it important to understand combination feeding?

New parents feeding choices extend beyond either breast or formula feeding, and the reality is that combination feeding is a very common feeding choice. It is therefore imperative that healthcare professionals understand what combination feeding is and know how to support families in their care choosing to do it.

The benefits of breastfeeding babies are well documented and widely recognised by healthcare practitioners. It is also known that any breastmilk for babies is of benefit². For some new parents knowing about the option to combination feed may bridge an important gap and mean their child receives some breastmilk rather than none. This resolution has a substantial impact on the health outcomes of the developing child and highlights the importance of the understanding around combination feeding.

Supporting parents to make an informed choice about combination feeding?

When supporting new parents in their infant feeding choice it is important to discuss both the challenges and the advantages of combination feeding to allow an informed decision to be made by the family.

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Challenges

It is important to recognise that combination feeding may come with its own set of challenges for families and to be aware and honest about these with parents. When introducing bottles to a breastfed baby the mother's breast milk supply may be impacted and reduced. Breast milk supply works on a supply and demand process, therefore if the breast is stimulated less, the milk supply will be less.

A mother's body produces the hormone oxytocin when she is close to her baby, and this triggers the release of breast milk. When the milk stores become emptied, a hormone called prolactin is released, and this hormone stimulates further milk production. It is important that supplementary bottle feeds are spread out with breastfeeds in-between to ensure adequate breastmilk supply is maintained³.

When combination feeding a baby, the mother will naturally begin to have longer intervals in-between breastfeeds and this may lead to her breasts becoming overfull and engorged. It is important to gently hand express off the excess milk to aid her comfort and help prevent complications with blocked ducts. However, to prevent further encouraging an excess supply by stimulating the supply and demand cycle of breast milk, the mother shouldn't completely empty the breast when engorged in between breastfeeds⁴.

Breastfed babies may not feed from a bottle straight away as the suck motion is different from a bottle than from the breast. Patience and perseverance are key, and parents may find using a teat designed to be more like a nipple supports a smoother transition into combination feeding⁵.

Potential advantages

Some women may have difficulties establishing breastfeeding and therefore may use bottle feeds to supplement their breastfeeds whilst they work to breastfeed exclusively⁶.

There may be a medical reason for which additional milk is recommended and therefore a bottle is introduced to a baby⁷.

A parent may be returning to work or need to be away from their baby requiring another care giver to need to feed them and therefore giving a bottle of expressed breast or formula milk may be necessary⁸.

Some parents wish to share the task of feeding their baby either to support the other parents bonding or to allow a parent to get some extra rest⁹.

It may also be the case that a mother started bottle feeding at birth but now wishes to breastfeed and so will utilise bottles in her transition into exclusively breastfeeding or combination feeding her baby⁸.

Healthcare practitioners role in combination feeding

It is important to continually recognise the benefits of breastfeeding babies for both short and long term maternal and child health outcomes. Healthcare professionals should ensure families are empowered to make an informed choice about infant feeding and that the continuum of breastfeeding is supported.

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