

HAVE THE CONFIDENCE TO  
**PICK UP A  
CUP**

Guidance to  
help your infant  
transition to a  
free-flow cup

This information aims to support parents and caregivers in transitioning their infant to using a free-flow cup.

**This guidance:**

- Offers advice on making this change
- Gives top tips to make this transition as smooth as possible



## When should my infant begin using a free-flow cup?

Free-flow cups can be used once an infant is 6 months old. Parents can choose to gradually transition milk feeds (both expressed breastmilk or formula milk) into a free-flow cup, and they can also introduce water in a free-flow cup from this age.

Infants can begin drinking water alongside solid foods from six months of age, regardless of whether they are breastfed, formula-fed, or combination fed.

### Important points:

- It is important that before the transition is made to using a cup, an infant can sit up and hold their head steady without assistance.
- If parents choose to bottle feed, bottles should not be used after an infant's first birthday.
- When transitioning to a free-flow cup, it is important a child under 1 still has the same amount of milk, even when weaning onto more solid foods.
- No sugar, or sweetener e.g. honey, should be added to an infant's milk or water.



## What should my infant be drinking?

**The World Health Organization and UNICEF recommends that all infants are breastfed for up to 2 years or longer.** Breastfeeding an infant up to 12 months of age is associated with a lower risk of tooth decay.

**Infant formula** is usually based on cows' milk and **is the only suitable alternative to breast milk in the first 12 months** of your infant's life. It is not needed once your infant is 12 months old.

**Breastmilk and formula are the only recommended drinks an infant can have until they are 6 months old.**

**At around 6 months old**, once your infant has started to eat more solid foods, you can offer them **sips of plain tap water** from a free-flow cup with meals. It is fine to give your infant water from the tap, without sterilising it first, at this age. Bottled water is not recommended for babies or toddlers as it may contain too much salt or sulphate.

When starting to offer more solid foods to your infant, you should continue to breastfeed. If your baby is formula feeding, give your baby first infant formula until they're 1 year old. As your baby increases the amount of more solid foods they eat, the amount of milk they want will decrease.

Once your baby is eating plenty of solids several times a day, they may even drop a milk feed altogether.

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## What should my infant be drinking? (continued)

### Cows' Milk:

Cows' milk can be used in cooking or mixed with food from around 6 months but should not be given as a drink to infant until they're 12 months old. This is because cows' milk does not contain enough iron to meet your infant's needs.

Whole milk should be given to infants until they're 2 years old because they need the extra energy and vitamins it contains.

### Goats' and sheep's milk

Goats' and sheep's milk are not suitable as drinks for infants under 1 years old. Like cows' milk, they do not contain enough iron and other nutrients infants need at this age.

### Soya drinks and other milk alternatives

You can give your infant unsweetened calcium-fortified milk alternatives, such as soya, oat or almond drinks, from the age of 1, as part of a healthy balanced diet.

**If your infant has an allergy or intolerance to milk, talk to your health visitor or GP. They can advise you about suitable milk alternatives.**

**Your infant does not need to have follow-on milk and toddler formulas.**

### Other soft drinks:

**Sugary drinks like fruit squash, milkshakes, and fruit juice can trigger tooth decay.** Infants under three years of age should not have anything that contains artificial sweeteners.

Infants under 12 months do not need fruit juice or smoothies. If you do choose to give these to your infant however, dilute the juices and smoothies (one part juice to 10 parts water) and limit them to mealtimes.

### Fizzy drinks

Avoid fizzy drinks as they contain caffeine, sugars and acids, which can cause tooth decay. Diet or reduced-sugar drinks are not recommended for infants and young children. Even low-calorie drinks and no-added-sugar drinks can encourage all children to develop a sweet tooth.

### Hot drinks

Tea and coffee are not suitable for infants or young children as they contain caffeine and can cause scolding. If sugar is added, this can lead to tooth decay.



# Why should my child use a free-flow cup?



Helps teeth and jaw development by teaching children to sip their drink, rather than suck the liquid.



Improves speech development.



Reduces the likelihood of developing other oral health issues.



Encourages children to manage their feelings in other ways, instead of relying on feeding time.



Protects children's teeth from tooth decay. Make sure to use only milk and water in the cup.



Reduces the likelihood of developing fussy eating habits.

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## What cup should I choose?

As part of Dudley Council's 'Pick Up A Cup' scheme, you have been given a free-flow cup. This means that the liquid flows out of the cup or spout without needing to be sucked. A free-flow cup is recommended for teeth and jaw development and protecting infant's teeth from tooth decay, as well as other benefits listed above.

There are lots of free-flow cups available to buy. It can take a bit of trial and error to find the cup that works best for your infant.

### What cup should I choose?

There are cups on the market that have spouts, or a silicone straw – either is fine. A cup with handles is fine also. These can help an infant to independently hold the cup until they've developed a stronger grip.

Once an infant has learnt how to sip their drink in a lidded cup, without spilling too much, it is then recommended they move onto an open cup.

## How can I help my infant to use a free-flow cup?

Here are some ways to help your infant learn the new skill of drinking from a cup:

- Sit comfortably with your infant. Make sure they are wearing a bib, or you use a muslin to catch any liquid that may spill.
- Start by using a free-flow cup with only a small amount of liquid in it. If there are any spills, there won't be much to clean up. You can always add more if your infant drinks it all.
- Tilt the cup slowly so your infant can begin to sip the liquid.
- Don't panic if your infant spits out some of the liquid to begin with. It may take a bit of time for them to get used to it.
- An infant may find it easier to use a cup with two handles first until they build up enough strength in their wrists.

Nutritionally, infants still need to have their milk when introduced to solid foods. You could offer expressed breastmilk or formula milk in the free-flow cup at first to encourage them to start drinking from one before trying water.



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## What are the top tips for making the transition to a free-flow cup?

It can be overwhelming for parents when trying to make the transition to a free-flow cup. Here are some top tips to help make this transition as smooth as possible:

### Timing is key

Make sure to choose a time to introduce a free-flow cup when other changes are not happening, for example not when an infant is going to nursery for the first time, or if they are unwell.

### Introduce your infant's form of milk, or water from a free-flow cup

Starting to reduce feeds gradually and introducing drinking milk from a free-flow cup afterwards is a good place to start. Put your infant in their highchair with some solid food and then afterwards offer their form of milk in the free-flow cup.

### Be consistent, even if your infant seems resistant at first

If you've started introducing the cup at a specific time of day (ie a certain mealtime), keep this consistent. You may be surprised how quickly your infant picks this up with a bit of repetition.

### Let your infant copy you

Try sitting your infant in a highchair at mealtimes and encourage them to mimic how you drink. Infants can like a lot from mirroring and will like the element of using a 'grown up cup'

### Try not to worry about spillages

It is important your infant is not discouraged from trying to use the cup, even if it gets a bit messy sometimes.

### Distraction is vital

If an infant used bottles for feeds, the old bottle needs to be hidden away. If the infant asks where their old bottle is, try to stay calm and use a distraction, like playing with their favourite toy, doing some singing, or a trying out a new game.

### Reward, reward, reward

It can be a huge transition for an infant to use a free-flow cup. Give them lots of praise, hugs, and playtime for using the free-flow cup, stressing how proud you are of them and how well they are doing.



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## How can I help my infant to still feel comforted, when transitioning to a cup?

Parents often associate feeds with a time they soothe, cuddle, comfort and bond with their infant. This time with your infant is important for their development. When your infant has repeated human contact from their caregivers, for example soft touch, cuddles, a smile, and a soothing voice, your infant's brain will release hormones which help their brain to grow and develop memory, thoughts, and language. It also can help an infant to feel that the world is a safe place for them.

Therefore, it is important the comfort your infant can feel from a feed, particularly at night-time, is replicated in other ways when you begin transitioning to a free-flow cup.

If you are offering milk from a bottle, then try making the bedtime feed the last one to go. When you're ready to stop the bedtime feed, try giving them milk in a free-flow cup at dinner or offering a healthy bedtime snack. It is important the last bit of milk given in the day is offered to the infant away from their bedroom. This will help to stop the association between feeding and comfort at bedtime.

If your infant is thirsty before bed, you can offer a breastfeed or you can give them water in the free-flow cup. Otherwise, it is important to try to keep every other part of their bedtime routine the same: a bath, toothbrushing, reading a book, singing lullabies and cuddles. Using comforting objects like a soft toy or blanket may help settle your infant during this time too.



## What can I do if my infant refuses to transition to a free-flow cup?

**Infants have lots of reasons for not wanting to use a free-flow cup at first.**

**Here are some ideas to support you if this happens:**

- Dip the spout of the cup into your infant's milk, before giving it to them. Do not use sugar or sweetener.
- Whether you are breastfeeding your baby or not, continue to hold them as you would previously during their feeding routine. This will comfort them and help them to feel safe in making this transition.
- Try a different type of free-flow cup. There are lots of cups for sale with a variety of different spouts, shapes and handles. It may take some time to find the one that works for you and your infant.
- Show your infant how it's done. Use the free-flow cup yourself and let your infant see you drink from it. If they have older siblings, you could ask them to join in too. It is amazing how much they can pick up from mirroring. Making a little sucking noise may encourage them to mimic you and sip the liquid from the free-flow cup.
- Try to always gently persist with water in the free-flow cup.

## How long will it take to make the transition to a free-flow cup?

It is important to remember that every infant is different, and every family is different, so try not to compare how quickly your infant makes the transition to a free-flow cup with others - they will get there in their own time.

**Having patience is key. Do not worry if using a free-flow cup does not go to plan at first. It is not always easy, but the benefits are fantastic. Keep trying and be positive about this change.**

### What can I do if my infant refuses to transition to a free-flow cup?

Reach out to your Health Visitor or a Family Hub Practitioner if you need any advice around using a free-flow cup.



For more information about oral health for infants, and making the transition to a free-flow cup, please visit the following websites:

#### Looking after your baby's teeth

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/baby/babys-development/teething/looking-after-your-babys-teeth/>

#### Why teeth care is important for babies

[https://www.nct.org.uk/baby-toddler/teething/why-teeth-care-important-for-babies?psafe\\_param=1&gad\\_source=1&gclid=CjwKC Ajwp8OpBhAFEiwAG7NaEgUto-bYe5ZMS8Dwp8qXkWLqduJOBb-ZtIHYPSPneup8qCIYgKbcKR0CeYEQAvD\\_BwE](https://www.nct.org.uk/baby-toddler/teething/why-teeth-care-important-for-babies?psafe_param=1&gad_source=1&gclid=CjwKC Ajwp8OpBhAFEiwAG7NaEgUto-bYe5ZMS8Dwp8qXkWLqduJOBb-ZtIHYPSPneup8qCIYgKbcKR0CeYEQAvD_BwE)

#### Drinks and cups for babies and young children

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/baby/weaning-and-feeding/drinks-and-cups-for-babies-and-young-children/>

#### Choosing cups for babies and toddlers

<https://www.nct.org.uk/baby-toddler/feeding/introducing-solids/choosing-cups-for-babies-and-toddlers>

#### Support for parents on infant feeding and relationship building

<https://www.unicef.org.uk/babyfriendly/support-for-parents/>





Scan the QR code for more information about infant oral health.



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