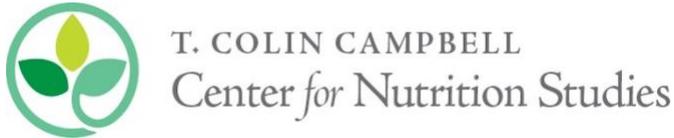


Whole Food, Plant-Based Baby Formula: Alternatives When Breastfeeding Isn't an Option
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The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends that mothers feed their babies only breast milk for the first six months and continue breastfeeding for up to two years while introducing a combination of nutritious solid foods.^[1]



But not all mothers are able to breastfeed. Illness, previous breast surgery, and conditions like polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS), hypothyroidism, or underdeveloped breasts can make it difficult to produce enough milk.^[2] Some medications unsafe for babies can contaminate breast milk.^[3] And not all employers provide sufficient maternity leave to allow for a full six months of breastfeeding.

If you're unable to breastfeed for any reason but want to raise your baby on a whole food, plant-based (WFPB) diet, there are several options—including plant-based baby formula—that can provide a nutritionally complete diet for your baby.

Work with a doctor or lactation consultant

It's not unusual for new mothers to have trouble breastfeeding. Before looking into breast milk alternatives, find out if you can correct the problems you're facing. Many common issues can be overcome with help and education from your doctor, your baby's pediatrician, or a trained lactation consultant.^[4]

Since regular nursing gets your milk flowing, addressing these problems can also increase low milk supply. Eating a wide variety of healthy plant-based foods, including oatmeal, chickpeas, leafy greens, fennel, and almonds, will help to support lactation as you continue to breastfeed.^[5]



Try a plant-based baby formula

If breastfeeding problems persist or you have a condition that makes breastfeeding difficult, you can try a baby formula made with plant-based ingredients.

This gets a little tricky if you're looking for something WFPB. Most infant formulas contain processed sweeteners, isolated nutrients, and extracted proteins. That's because the FDA's standards for formulas are based on the specific combination of nutrients that babies need to thrive.^[6] Fortification is necessary for formulas to meet these standards.

Currently, moms in the U.S. have one mostly whole-food option: Enfamil's plant-based toddler formula, which is suitable for babies when they reach one year of age. If your baby is younger than one, discuss other plant-based formulas with his or her pediatrician. The formula you choose should contain:^[7]

- Vitamins A, D, E and K
- B vitamins
- Folate
- Calcium
- Zinc
- Iron
- Healthy fats
- A carbohydrate source

Be aware that the vitamin D3 in many "plant-based" formulas is sourced from lanolin, a waxy substance that comes from sheep's wool. Some formulas are also sweetened with brown rice syrup, which raises the concern of arsenic contamination.^[8]

What about soy-based baby formulas?

Soy formula is a common choice for moms who don't feed their babies cow's milk, though there isn't an absolute consensus among all health officials. Some research shows subtle developmental differences in

babies fed soy-based formulas, but these differences don't appear to cause any health problems in adulthood.^[9]^[10] Soy intolerance or allergy is another consideration: about 0.4% of infants in the U.S. are allergic to soy.^[11]

Avoid homemade plant-based baby formula

Whatever you do, don't turn to the internet for baby formula recipes. Breast milk contains a balance of over 30 nutrients, and it's difficult—if not impossible—to match that balance in your kitchen. Trying to make your own formula can pose serious risks to your baby:

- A lack of nutrients can affect growth and development at a critical time.^[13]
- Excess nutrients may cause damage to developing organs.^[14]
- Homemade formulas may contain ingredients that can cause allergic reactions or digestive disturbances.
- Some recipes include ingredients or supplements that are meant for adults.^[15]

Plant-based milk is also an inadequate alternative. Even whole-food products lack many of the critical nutrients found in breast milk.^[16]



Ask about donor milk from breast milk banks

In special cases, you may be able to get breast milk for your baby from a hospital or local milk bank. The Human Milk Banking Association of North America (HMBANA) sets safety and sanitization guidelines for its member banks.^[17] These include screening milk for illnesses, testing for bacteria, and pasteurizing to remove pathogens.^[18] Pasteurization destroys some nutrients and immune compounds, but the milk remains nutritionally sound.

This option is usually reserved for babies with specific needs, such as premies, babies with formula allergies, or babies with compromised immune systems. If your baby meets these criteria, ask your doctor if you're eligible to receive donated breast milk. Note that the FDA hasn't set standards for milk banks and that HMBANA guidelines are voluntary, so you'll need to do your research to verify that the proper procedures are followed.^[19]

Your doctor and your baby’s pediatrician can help you make the best choice for a breast milk alternative that will start your baby off with all the nutrients necessary to build a strong foundation for lifelong health. If that means choosing a plant-based baby formula that’s a little less “whole food,” don’t worry. You’ll have plenty of time to introduce your baby to all the benefits of a WFPB diet as he or she grows.

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