

Pediatrician explains why infants need baby formula instead of cow's milk

May 20 2024, by Mark R. Corkins, MD, FAAP, American Academy of Pediatrics



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Many parents ask why they can't feed their baby regular cow's milk instead of breast milk or formula.

There are two main reasons: Infants cannot digest [cow's milk](#) as completely or easily as they digest [breast milk](#) or [baby formula](#). More importantly, cow's milk is not a source of complete nutrition for babies under age 1, since it does not contain enough of certain nutrients they need.

Cow's milk contains high concentrations of protein and minerals, which can stress a newborn's immature kidneys. This can cause [severe illness](#) if your baby gets a fever, diarrhea or heat stress.

In addition, cow's milk lacks the proper amounts of iron, vitamin C and other nutrients that infants need. Cow's milk also does not contain the healthiest types of fat for growing babies.

It may even cause iron-deficiency anemia in some babies because cow's milk protein can irritate the lining of the stomach and intestine. This can lead to the loss of blood, from small amounts you can't see all the way to bloody stools.

For these reasons, your baby should not receive any cow's milk (or other non-human milk or a milk substitute) until they are about 12 months of age unless no alternative is available.

Once your baby is past a year old, you may give them pasteurized whole cow's milk or reduced-fat (2%) milk, provided they have a balanced diet of solid foods (cereals, vegetables, fruits and meats). But limit their intake of milk to 2 cups (about 16 ounces) per day or less. More than 24 ounces a day has been associated with [iron deficiency](#) if toddlers aren't getting enough other healthy iron-rich foods.

If your baby is not yet eating a broad range of solid foods, talk to your pediatrician about the best nutrition for them.

At this age, children still need a higher fat content, which is why whole vitamin D-fortified milk is recommended for most children after turning 1. If your child is or is at risk for being overweight, or if there is a family history of obesity, [high blood pressure](#) or [heart disease](#), your pediatrician may recommend 2% (reduced-fat) milk.

Do not give your baby 1% (low-fat) or nonfat (skimmed) milk before their second birthday, as it does not contain enough fat for brain development. After two years of age, you should discuss your child's nutritional needs with your pediatrician. However, many children at this age can transition to lower-fat milk if that is what your family uses.

2024 Tribune Content Agency, LLC.

Citation: Pediatrician explains why infants need baby formula instead of cow's milk (2024, May 20) retrieved 18 June 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2024-05-pediatrician-infants-baby-formula-cow.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--