

Connecticut WIC Program:

Consistent Breastfeeding Education Messages: Weaning is a Part of Breastfeeding

Why is this important?

Weaning is part of chest/breastfeeding, every mother/infant dyad will eventually wean. For many reasons, moms may be hesitant to bring up this subject with WIC staff. Although we would love to see our breastfeeding participants continue to breastfeed for at least 6 months or longer, it is important to respect their decisions to wean when they and/or their baby are ready. Openly discussing weaning as part of breastfeeding, both prenatally and postpartum, will reassure them that when they are ready to wean, WIC staff is available for support. If there is a contraindication due to medical concerns (mom or baby) and a health care provider advises weaning, WIC can help. WIC staff can help navigate if there are other options to preserve breastfeeding to avoid premature weaning. Or WIC can support and affirm a mom if weaning is eminent or if breastfeeding has already ceased.

WIC's Goal: Help moms feel good physically, mentally and emotionally with their decision to wean and assist them through this stage of breastfeeding.

Learning Objectives: After participating in a group session or individual counseling the participant will:

1. Decide if they truly want to wean or if has just encountered a stumbling block in their breastfeeding journey and that there are options to help continue if that is their preference.
2. Feel good about the decision to wean and know they will be supported along the way.
3. Be able to wean with knowledge of ways to avoid physical discomfort and medical complications.

Provide Affirmation:

*If Mom chooses not to wean, "You should feel good about your decision, we are here for you". (If Mom decides **not** to stop breastfeeding but has had breastfeeding challenges assess how you can counsel her).*

If the decision is to wean, focus on her breastfeeding accomplishments.

"Your breast milk has given your baby a great start in life!"

"Be proud of your body for nourishing your baby during this time."

"Weaning is a natural stage in breastfeeding."

Key educational messages: Determine if they are ready to wean and if so, support the decision to make the transition comfortable-physically, mentally, and emotionally.

❖ Anticipatory Guidance

- Weaning begins with the introduction of breastmilk substitutes or solid foods, even if there is no intention to discontinue breastfeeding. It is the natural beginning of the weaning process.
- Weaning may be initiated by mom or infant or may be a mutual decision.
- Don't assume they are planning to stop breastfeeding just because they are approaching the child's first birthday. Many families continue breastfeeding into toddlerhood and beyond.

- There may be pressure felt to maintain goals or deadlines set for weaning during pregnancy in the early postpartum period. Remind and affirm them that breastfeeding is a process and goals may change. What is important is that they have the resources and support to meet their goals, whatever they are.
- Weaning can be an emotional experience. You may want to use the Edinburgh PMAD screen to check in with them emotionally. Even if it is outside the protocol timeframes. Provide referrals to counseling or support resources where needed.
- Engorgement or plugged ducts may occur if weaning happens abruptly. Provide information on ways to wean slowly and soothe engorged breast and plugged ducts if this occurs. Review the signs of mastitis and refer to a health care provider if mastitis is suspected.

❖ **Assess if weaning is her goal:**

- Ask what weaning means for them. Is it introducing a bottle, but still offering pumped breast milk? Is it to stop offering breast milk all together? Or is it simply wanting to begin solids?
- Although there may be pressure to continue breastfeeding from others, the one to ultimately decide when to wean her baby. Keep breastfeeding goals in mind.
- Ask open ended questions to be sure weaning is the goal. Sometimes moms think they need to wean in situations such as returning to work, taking prescribed medication, or a perceived low milk supply.
 - ✦ Ex: What lead you to the decision to wean?
- Clarify if this is the mom's goal or someone else's.
- Offer options to continue breastfeeding when challenges arise to breastfeeding.
- Empower an informed decision.

❖ **Give support when weaning is the goal:**

- Discuss that breastfeeding gave the baby a great start in life.
- Help choose a good time to begin weaning. Discuss other upcoming changes and how they may help with the natural transition or present challenges to weaning (examples: parent starting a new job or school, new child care situation, introducing foods, infant teething etc.)
- Circumstances may change as weaning begins and weaning may need to pause or slow down. Remind them it's OK to change goals or strategies to as things come up.
- Self-empower them it is their body and baby, their choice to decide to wean. Always remember to make them feel good about the decision to breastfeed and to wean. Respect the decision and that they are capable and assist in making informed decisions about how to feed the baby.
- Encourage them to resist comparing their situation with that of other families, focusing on their needs baby's needs instead.
- Explore ways to keep comfortable while weaning. Gradual weaning will help prevent discomfort and risk of medical complications (engorgement, plugged ducts, mastitis). Eliminating one nursing session at a time over a series of weeks, leaving nighttime and early morning sessions (if these are the hardest) until later in the process, WIC can help with the transition. In the meantime, ice packs can help ease any discomfort (fullness) experienced and reassure that discomfort will only be temporary.
- Remember that breastfeeding isn't only about nutrition, it's also a time for closeness and bonding. Offer suggestions to be close and bond with baby/child depending on their age.
- Ask how other caregivers that can help such as the baby's other parent, grandparents, other family, or friends of the family. These individuals can help mom in this process.

❖ Birth to 12 months

- Babies at this age breastfeed every couple of hours. Many enjoy this closeness and intimacy but still some mothers might find it overwhelming.
- Weaning works best at this stage if done gradually.
- Be sure to assess intake of human milk substitutes or complimentary foods to be sure they are appropriate and adequate based on stage of weaning and infant's age/development.
- Infant's at this age have sensitive digestive systems. Changes in breastfeeding, or intake of infant formula may cause changes in bowel movements, among other digestive issues. Provide mom with guidance on when to speak the doctor regarding these changes.

❖ 12 to 24 months

- Try not to wean when there are other major changes in your child's life - e.g., sleeping in their own bed, potty training, starting daycare.
- You may try to drop daytime feeds before night-time or naptime feeds since these may give your child the most comfort.
- Try distracting your child by introducing activities that would occupy their time. This could be where another caregiver can step in as well, if mom's presence is enough to cause the child to think of breastfeeding.
- Set limits for times to breastfeed, such as only when at home or only after lunch.
- Try replacing the dropped feed with an alternative like smoothie, warm cup of milk or a meal your child enjoys.
- Clothing can help to set boundaries when weaning an active toddler. Wearing clothing that limits ability to latch as easily during times of the day she is working on phasing out breastfeeding can reinforce these boundaries.

❖ Older

- Praise them for the wonderful accomplishment. They not only met but exceeded National and State breastfeeding goals, but also American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP and World Health Organization's breastfeeding recommendations.
- Help them pick a time that isn't filled with other major events or transitions on child's life.
- Start by replacing one or two nursing sessions per day with pumped breast milk or cow's milk given in a cup and be sure to make up for that lost reconnection time by spending a little extra quality time with growing toddler.
- Talk with toddler and explain why they may not be able to nurse at certain times or for as long. They may keep asking – and you may have to keep explaining.
- Can also use an "out of sight, out of mind" approach that involves going into a different room during times that child may wish to nurse.
- To eliminate overnight wakeups and nursing sessions, have your partner instead comfort child back to sleep or simply sitting with them until they fall back asleep.
- Weaning can be a gradual process and there may be times when the child might protest or seems to revert, encourage the parent to remaining patient, consistent, and reassuring can make all the difference.

Websites:

<https://www.llli.org/breastfeeding-info/weaning-how-to/>

<https://breastfeedingusa.org/content/article/weaning-every-mothers-journey>

<https://wicbreastfeeding.fns.usda.gov/weaning-your-baby>

<https://www.cdc.gov/nutrition/infantandtoddlernutrition/breastfeeding/weaning.html>

Resources:

La Leche League International www.llli.org

Breastfeeding USA <https://breastfeedingusa.org/>

Postpartum Support International <https://psictchapter.com/>

Books:

Bengson, Diane. *How Weaning Happens*. Schaumburg, IL: La Leche League International, 1999. Print.

The Womanly Art of Breastfeeding New Eighth Edition. N.p., n.d. Web. 16 Apr. 2013.