

Ep #33: Night Weaning: When and How To Reduce Baby's Overnight Feeds



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Devon Clement

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Continuing our ongoing series on baby sleep, we are going to talk today about how to get started reducing or completely eliminating overnight feeds. Stay tuned.

Welcome to *Parenthood Prep*, the only show that helps sleep-deprived parents and overwhelmed parents-to-be successfully navigate those all-important early years with their baby, toddler, and child. If you are ready to provide the best care for your newborn, manage those toddler tantrums, and grow with your child, you're in the right place. Now here's your host, baby and parenting expert, Devon Clement.

Hello and welcome back to the *Parenthood Prep* podcast.

It is another really gorgeous fall day. I feel like fall is trying to show me that it's not such a bad season after all. And she's kind of winning me over, I have to say. Of course there are always downsides, because now New York and New Jersey are under fire warnings because it's been so dry and we haven't had that miserable gray, cold drizzle that usually hallmarks November.

Honestly, I'm grateful for it. Because I think a miserable cold drizzle, on top of everything that's happening in the country and in the world, might just cause me to spend the rest of the next four years in my bed with a pillow over my head. Which is something that I have the privilege to do, but I will not.

I am still in the numb phase of things, but I'm sure we will have plenty to talk about in the coming weeks about how we can help and support our friends and family and community members and people that we care about, which should be everyone who really needs our help and support during this difficult time.

And something that always helps everyone, no matter what, is getting more sleep. So continuing our theme of how to improve your baby's sleep, we are going to talk today about night weaning. What does that mean? It means reducing or eliminating overnight feeds to help your baby sleep better.

We're going to talk about when you can do it. We're going to talk about how to do it. We're going to talk about how to know when it's right for your baby and all

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that kind of stuff. And the good news is it's a lot easier than you think, and you can probably do it a lot sooner than you think.

How do you know if your baby is ready? Well, every baby is different. But as a rule of thumb, when they're about 12 pounds, they can go about 12 hours overnight. And of course, as always, you want to check with your pediatrician. Now, is 12 hours by 12 pounds something that everyone should be trying to do? Not necessarily. You know, it's kind of hard. You have to push the envelope a little bit.

I like four months, especially if you're sleep training on your own. I think that's a good benchmark, assuming your baby has no growth issues or there are no medical concerns or health concerns. Or if you're nursing, any milk supply concerns or things like that. Assuming everything is healthy and the pediatrician gives the okay, it is totally fine to start reducing feeds even earlier than that.

But move towards eliminating them completely for 10-12 hours by the time your baby is 12 pounds or about three to four months old. And pretty much once they hit four or five months, unless there's a major issue, I have no qualms about trying to get that baby to go 12 hours overnight.

Now, does that mean you have to do it that way? Of course not. Plenty of parents still want to keep a night feed for whatever reason. Maybe one parent works late and really wants to see the baby overnight and wouldn't get to spend time with the baby if they didn't have a night feed. That's totally fine.

Maybe you're nursing and you don't want to pump that much and know that it's better for your supply to still have a feed overnight rather than a pumping session. That's totally fine. I'm going to talk about all the different ways that you can night wean and what that can look like. You don't have to just go all the way.

But what I'm also going to tell you is if your baby has those milestones, four months old, 12 pounds, you got the approval from the pediatrician, you could just stop feeding them overnight. You could say one night, "I'm putting you down for bed at seven o'clock and I am not going to feed you again until seven in the morning," and that baby would be fine.

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They would be hungry for sure. They would not starve to death. They would not be traumatized. They would not have any major, major issues as a result of you doing that. So sometimes when we are in home with a family, sleep training a baby and we determine that that's going to be the next step, we just do that. We just rip that Band-Aid off and it is fine.

I was just listening to a True *Crime* podcast where a lot of the people that were speaking had Southern accents, and I feel like I'm picking it up a little bit. So if you hear me say anything a little weird that doesn't sound like my normal, it's just because I am a chameleon when it comes to accents. You'd think it would make me very good at learning languages, but it doesn't. I just pick up accents really easily.

You should hear me after I spend a couple hours back in North Jersey, where I'm originally from. I sound like Marisa Tomei in *My Cousin Vinny*, AKA Mona Lisa Vito. "No, da defense is wrong."

Anyway, where was I? Your baby would be fine. And that is what a lot of pediatricians are going to tell you to do. Just stop it. Just stop feeding them. Just throw them in the room, shut the door and forget they exist until the morning. I don't like that approach. I think it's really, really hard for the parents. I think it's hard for the babies. And I think it's not great for long-term success because it's hard to sustain. But it does work and your baby will be fine.

So if we're coming at it, not from this side of, "Well, how much do we need to feed them so they'll survive?" The answer is zero. They will be fine. You give them a nice big feed at bedtime and they will survive until the morning. What we want to do is look at our ultimate goal of wanting to get rid of those feeds entirely, and say to ourselves, "How little can we feed them?"

When you're thinking about this, it starts from a place of 'where are you right now?' Is your baby eating three times overnight, four times? Are they eating every two hours? Are they eating three or four times during the night, but they're only taking two ounces, or they're only nursing for five minutes? Are you down to one feed, but it's a huge feed? That's a six-ounce bottle or a 15-minute nursing session or whatever in the middle of the night.

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Or are they sleeping in bed with you and just snacking on and off all night because having a boob in their mouth is the only way that they're able to get back to sleep? So you want to look at where you're coming from. And if where you're coming from is already a pretty good place, they're only eating once, basically the equivalent of one feed during the daytime overnight ...

Whether that's, for example, six ounces, or they are taking three feeds of two ounces each, or they are taking one feed of six ounces, that's about one overnight feed. Even if they're taking it over a longer period.

If they're eating more than that, if they're getting a third to half of their daily calories overnight, you want to move the process along a little more slowly. But if they're not eating that much overnight and you just want to get across the finish line, then you can move the process along a little bit more quickly.

You might say, well, "Devon, you say that, sure, the baby is fine overnight, that they don't need to eat, but my baby is definitely hungry." And yes, they probably are because right now they're used to eating in the middle of the night. They're getting whatever percentage of their calories for a 24-hour period overnight.

If you skipped dinner one day, you would feel hungry. But if you started eating dinner at 11 p.m. instead of 7 p.m., you would stop being hungry at 7 p.m. because you would just get into a routine where dinner was at 11 p.m. Does that make sense? So we need to move those calories. We need to move that feed to the daytime.

Now you're going to say, "Devon, I have tried to feed my baby more during the day. They will not do it. They will not take it. I can't get them to do it. So that's not going to work." Well, of course not. Because they're full from feeding overnight.

I've talked about this before. If you give your baby a big old feed at 5 a.m., which is pretty common because they're pretty restless during that time and that's a good way to get them back to sleep. Sometimes they won't go back to sleep at all unless you do that. So it's pretty common that your baby takes a big old feed at 5 a.m. or 6 a.m. and then doesn't want to eat at 7 a.m. or 8 a.m. when they wake up for the day. Of course not, because they're still full.

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But if you said, "Tonight, I'm not going to feed you at 5 a.m., I'm going to wait till 7 a.m." yes, that baby would be fussy. Yes, you would be awake. You would probably be soothing them and rocking them and whatever. But at 7 a.m., they would take a big feed because they would be hungry. Does that make sense?

So what we really need to do is simultaneously pull back on the night feeds while we are increasing the feeds during the day. It's as simple as that. Again, you can do that as slow or fast as you want. If your baby is down to one feed at 4 or 5 in the morning and you want to just cut that out and say, "That's it. We're not doing that tonight," they're going to take a nice big feed at 7 a.m.

They're probably going to incorporate those calories into their feeds the rest of the day, and you're going to be golden after two or three nights of doing that. When I'm sleep training, usually by that point the babies had enough practice going back to sleep that they can just work it out themselves. They're awake, they're fussy, maybe they're crying on and off, but they go back to sleep. They wake up again. They go back to sleep.

Sometimes they're up for a while, and then they pass back out and they sleep for another hour. And always, always, always, that first night after we significantly reduce feeds or cut them out completely, the parents are shocked at how calm the baby is.

And honestly, the first few times I sleep trained, I was shocked. This was a baby who was taking maybe 10 total ounces overnight. Over the course of the three nights we were together, we got them down to zero ounces overnight. And now they're waking up in the morning like, "Oh, hi guys. Food? Yeah, I could eat. Sure. Yeah, that sounds good. Yeah whenever. Change my diaper, that's fine. Yeah. Okay. Yeah, food? Yeah, that sounds good."

They adapt so quickly to these changes. And often, as we've talked about before, what seems like hunger is just needing to fall back asleep, and they have that sleep association of feeding so they're looking for that food, that nursing, that bottle, whatever. They're saying, "I need this to go back to sleep." But they don't actually need it to satiate their hunger. They are only looking for it to go back to sleep or for whatever.

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During the day, just as a side note, especially if you're nursing on demand and you're with your baby all day, they're going to be looking to nurse a lot just because they like doing it. They're going to be looking to nurse when they're tired. They're going to be looking to nurse when they're fussy. It doesn't always mean that they're hungry.

And you can absolutely nurse for comfort, there's nothing wrong with that. I don't want it to sound like I think there is. But I want you to be aware that just because your baby is looking to nurse, it does not mean they are hungry and they need the calories right this minute. They do not necessarily need the nutrition.

A lot of babies that I see, who are just constantly asking to nurse, are like little Michelin men. They just have rolls upon rolls upon rolls. And you're like, "Okay, this baby could go 45 minutes without milk. I think that they will survive that."

So for that reason, a big question about night weaning is can we do it if the baby is breastfed, body fed, trust fed, nursed? Can we night wean? A lot of the dialogue out there says that you can't.

It says that breastfed babies just are not going to stay asleep as long. Breast milk is processed faster in their tummy because it's just oh, so healthy. So they are just hungry sooner than formula fed babies. That formula is so junky that it sits in their stomach for longer and that's what makes them sleep so well. It's actually fake. It's not really good for them to sleep that long. Blah, blah, blah. Shut up, shut up, shut up. I don't want to hear it.

Here is the difference between breastfeeding and bottle feeding. Yes, sure, breast milk might be digested faster. So what? Your dinner gets digested. You're not still digesting your dinner at six in the morning. We're going to digest our food overnight and we're going to have an empty stomach, and that is okay.

The thing that I think distinguishes a better sleeping, bottle-fed baby, whether that baby is bottle fed formula or human milk is the behaviors around the nursing type of feeding versus the bottle feeding. It has very little to do with what they are being fed. Unless, of course, it's something that's giving them a reaction or making them extra gassy or something like that.

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The thing is that when you are bottle feeding your baby, you are filling up that bottle, you know how much is in there. Theoretically, in this example, you are feeding them an amount that's very good for their age and size. We're not giving a 15-pound baby two ounces at a time.

We're giving them five ounces, six ounces, seven ounces, eight ounces, whatever. We're giving them a good solid feed, and making sure that they take it all. Remember I talked about in the bottle-feeding episode, if they are sucking it dry, not a drop left, they want more.

So you are feeding this baby a good amount and then a couple of hours later that baby starts acting hungry. You're like, "Great, now you're hungry." But if that baby started acting hungry 30 minutes later, you'd be like, "You just had seven ounces. There is no way that you want to eat. I bet you're tired. I'm going to put you down for a nap. I'm going to use the pacifier. I'm going to rock you. I'm going to put you down in the crib awake. I think you're fussy because you're tired."

When you're nursing a baby, your breast does not have those little markings on the side that show how much they've eaten. You are feeding them until they stop feeding. And then if 30 minutes later they start acting hungry again, you think, "Oh, well they just must not have eaten enough, and I'm going to feed them some more."

And then that happens another 30 minutes later, and it happens two hours later, and it happens one hour later. Maybe all this time, this baby was tired. Or maybe they've just gotten into the habit of snacking because you're not giving them these full feeds. So what you want to do, if you are primarily body feeding, is make sure that they are taking full feeds.

The other thing that happens is, in the middle of the night ... and I know this as a caregiver who has never breastfed a baby because I don't have my own children ... when it's the middle of the night and you have a baby that's awake and you don't really feel like going into the kitchen, turning on the light, getting a bottle and making it, then cleaning the bottle when it's done, and maybe the baby's not even hungry and then the bottle's going to go to waste, you're going to try other ways to get that baby back to sleep before you resort to feeding.

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But if you are nursing and the milk is right there, fresh from the tap, available to the baby, you're going to bust that out. I mean, I can't tell you the number of times I have been at an overnight shift going, "Oh my God, I wish I could stick my boob in your mouth right now and get you to go back to sleep because that would be so easy."

So I do not blame anyone who has been doing this. God, it's amazing. I'm so glad that you're able to do it. But when you want to start creating new routines and new habits, you're going to want to stop taking the easy way out of just sticking a boob in their mouth at night.

And this may mean you switch off with your partner, you switch off with a caregiver, or even a friend or family member who's willing to come over and help you with this night weaning for a few nights. Because, honestly, you give a baby that is used to body feeding to a person that is not producing milk, they are going to calm down a lot faster and be like, "Fine, I can see you have nothing for me. I'll let you rock me back to sleep."

But if the person who makes milk for them is rocking them, they're going to be like, "I know what you've got in there. I want that." Do you wake up in the middle of the night and make yourself a sandwich? I mean, maybe. But for the most part, we do not do that. If you woke up in the middle of the night and there was a beautiful sandwich on your nightstand, you would eat it.

Or a fresh baked plate of cookies or brownies from Ryan Gosling. You would smell those cookies. You'd be like, "Oh my God, yes. The smell of fresh baked cookies. That's amazing. Let me open my eyes. Oh my God, it's fresh baked cookies. I have to eat them." But you're not getting up in the middle of the night and making cookies, unless you're finding Ryan Gosling in the kitchen and then you're making brownies. Podcast listeners will get that joke.

Anyway, the behaviors around bottle feeding are that you know when your baby has eaten a lot. You know when they should be full and should not be hungry. Also it's more difficult, sometimes more work, to prepare and feed a baby a bottle so you're going to go with some easier options first. So those are the two things that you can try switching up if you want to start night weaning your baby.

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And now this episode has gone on for so long, I feel like we're just going to call it "How to prepare for night weaning. How to tell when your baby is ready," and not how to actually do it. So you can stay tuned next week for how to do it.

So yes, if your baby is around 12 pounds, if you've gotten the okay from your pediatrician, if they're over 12 weeks, three months, four months ... This is not to say they can't do it before that, especially if they're super chunky ... but that's where I would say you can start thinking about cutting out feeds completely. You can definitely start to think about going down to one feed overnight.

And in our next episode, we will talk all about how to do that.

Alright, listen up, folks. We love to joke around but it's time to get real. And that real talk, it's all about giving your babies the roasting they deserve. Yep, you heard it right. We're calling for an epic Baby Roast.

We want you to drop a voice note on our website and call out your little ones for their adorable crimes. Did your baby spit up on your brand-new dress the second you put it on? Maybe they decided to scream through your sister's wedding vows? We want to hear all the juicy details.

Head over to HappyFamilyAfter.com, or hit the link in the show notes. Every page on the site has a button on the side for you to record straight from your phone. Your story might just make it onto an episode of the *Parenthood Prep* podcast. We can't wait to hear.

Thanks for listening to this week's episode of *Parenthood Prep*. If you want to learn more about the services Devon offers, as well as access her free monthly newborn care webinars, head on over to www.HappyFamilyAfter.com.