

Avoiding Holiday Weaning

by Norma Ritter, IBCLC, RLC

One chilly January morning, a group of mothers and babies sat around a living room fireplace sipping warm drinks. They were at a La Leche League meeting and had just finished a lively discussion about the vital importance of breastfeeding to the health of both mothers and babies. Towards the end of the discussion, two of the mothers had exchanged glances. At the time they had said nothing, but now that people were just socializing, they spoke up.

*Amy spoke first.

"I came to this meeting," she said, "because my 3 month old baby has almost completely weaned from the breast. I don't understand what happened. I was really hoping to nurse for at least a year, but Will simply isn't interested in nursing any longer."

Amy looked distressed, and her friend, Chrissie, took over.

"The same thing happened to me! Alison gets so fussy when I offer to nurse her. She seems to have forgotten what to do. The odd thing is, my breasts don't even feel full anymore. Could my milk have suddenly dried up?"

As they continued to share their experiences, a pattern started to emerge. It seemed that both Amy and Chrissie had both fallen victim to "holiday weaning syndrome," to which younger babies are particularly vulnerable. You can find reference to this syndrome in the book, "The Womanly Art of Breastfeeding."

As the holiday season drew near, the mothers had become caught up in the excitement of planning parties and family gatherings, buying presents, cleaning house, decorating and baking. Shopping trips in crowded, noisy malls can be a hassle, so they often found it convenient to nurse their babies and leave them home with family or friends. Leaving a bottle of expressed milk in case the baby became hungry seemed like a logical thing to do in case they were held up by long lines at the check-out counter or heavy traffic on the way home. In fact, their trips often took much longer than expected, and when the bottles of expressed milk ran out, their babies were given formula.

Then there were the office parties.

Amy and Chrissie's husbands both worked for the same company, which had a tradition of departmental holiday parties. Once again, Will and Alison were left at home with bottles, more and more of them containing formula.

It did not stop there. At family gatherings, their relatives were eager to hold and feed the babies. With everything else that was going on, Amy and Chrissie found it quicker to mix up some formula than to pump. At first, their breasts felt uncomfortably full when they missed a nursing, but this soon subsided. All the "help" around the house gave them more time to cook the large meals and bake the fancy desserts that their families seemed to expect, but less time to nurse their babies.

By the time the holidays were over, the babies were getting almost all their nutrition from bottles of formula. Their mothers' milk production had slowed to a mere trickle, because breasts only make more milk when milk is removed, either by breastfeeding and/or pumping. The babies had come to prefer eating from full bottles of formula rather than from empty breasts.

Amy and Chrissie asked the other mothers how they had avoided inadvertent weaning during the holiday season.

Here are some of the ideas that were shared:

- Agree beforehand to limit gift giving. This helps with shopping and saves money too!
- If you decorate your house, ask friends to help instead of doing it all yourself. You can direct operations from your rocking chair.
- Take shorter shopping trips and bring along your baby. If you are still feeling shy about nursing in public, feed your baby just before you leave home, in the car or in dressing rooms.
- Take your baby to the party. Hosts are usually referring to older children who can get into trouble underfoot when they say "Adults only." Wearing your baby in a sling or wrap makes it easy to nurse discreetly.
- Baby-wearing is also useful when you have guests. It enables you to keep your baby from being passed from one person to the next and becoming over stimulated. If you keep a running list of chores on the refrigerator, you can point to it whenever somebody offers to help.

- Ask guests to bring food contributions instead of making all the meals yourself. Telling Aunt Jane that you have been looking forward to her special spinach dish all year should do the trick!

- Even if your milk production does decrease, you can usually bring it back to full production simply by nursing and/or pumping more frequently. Talk to your local La Leche League Leader or IBCLC (International Board Certified Lactation Consultant) or WIC Breastfeeding Coordinator for tips on increasing your milk.

*All names have been changed.

You can find more information on this topic here:

- [The Womanly Art of Breastfeeding, La Leche League International](#)
- [How to Avert Nursing Strikes during Special Occasions](#)
- [My Baby Has Weaned before I Was Ready! Help!](#)
- [How Can I Increase My Milk Supply?](#)
- [Milk Supply Issues](#)
- [My Baby Is Suddenly Refusing to Nurse. Does That Mean It's Time to Wean?](#)

These articles are of a general nature. They are not intended as medical advice, nor meant to replace the services of a licensed medical professional.

To find a local IBCLC (International Board Certified Lactation Consultant) who can address your breastfeeding concerns, go to www.ilca.org

Norma Ritter is the mother of three grown children and the grandmother of five grandchildren, all of whom were breastfed. She is the owner of Breastfeeding Matters in the Capital Region www.normaritter.com and has been an IBCLC (International Board Certified Lactation Consultant) in private practice since 1995.

You can reach Norma at breastfeedingmatters@gmail.com