Introduction

The time from birth until a child's second birthday is a critically important period for proper growth and development. It also is key for establishing healthy dietary patterns that may influence the trajectory of eating behaviors and health throughout the life course. During this period, nutrients critical for brain development and growth must be provided in adequate amounts. **Children in this age group consume small quantities of foods, so it's important to make every bite count!**

Key Recommendations

- **For about the first 6 months of life,** exclusively feed infants human milk. Continue to feed infants human milk through at least the first year of life, and longer if desired. Feed infants iron-fortified infant formula during the first year of life when human milk is unavailable.
- Provide infants with supplemental vitamin D beginning soon after birth.
- **At about 6 months,** introduce infants to nutrient-dense complementary foods.
- Introduce infants to potentially allergenic foods along with other complementary foods.
- Encourage infants and toddlers to consume a variety of foods from all food groups. Include foods rich in iron and zinc, particularly for infants fed human milk.
- Avoid foods and beverages with added sugars.
- Limit foods and beverages higher in sodium.
- As infants wean from human milk or infant formula, transition to a healthy dietary pattern.

Human milk feeding alone is the ideal form of nutrition from birth through about age 6 months. Human milk provides necessary nutrients, protective factors against disease, and other unique immunological benefits. If human milk is unavailable, infants should be fed an iron-fortified commercial infant formula. Once an infant is developmentally ready, foods and beverages should be introduced to complement human milk feeding. These complementary foods and beverages are essential to meet the nutrient requirements of infants starting at about age 6 months and should be selected carefully to help meet these needs. As an infant becomes a toddler, and learns to eat a variety of foods, flavors, and textures, the goal of complementary feeding becomes establishing a healthy dietary pattern and transitioning to a healthy family diet by age 2.

Putting the Key Recommendations Into Action

Feed Infants Human Milk for the First 6 Months, If Possible

Exclusive human milk feeding is one of the best ways to start an infant off on the path of lifelong healthy nutrition. Exclusive human milk feeding, commonly referred to as exclusive breastfeeding, refers to an infant consuming only human milk, and not in combination with infant formula and/or complementary foods or beverages (including water), except for medications or vitamin and mineral supplementation.

Human milk can support an infant's nutrient needs for about the first 6 months of life, with the exception of vitamin D and potentially iron. In addition to nutrients, human milk includes bioactive substances and immunologic properties that support infant health and growth and development.

U.S. data show that about 84 percent of infants born in 2017 were ever fed human milk, with only 25 percent fed human milk exclusively through age 6 months, and 35 percent continuing to be fed any human milk at age 12 months. Nearly one-quarter of infants were fed some human milk beyond age 12 months, with about 15 percent of toddlers being fed human milk at age 18 months.

Families may have a number of reasons for not having human milk for their infant. For example, a family may choose not to breastfeed, a child may be adopted, or the mother may be unable to produce a full milk supply or may be unable to pump and store milk safely due to family or workplace pressures. If human milk is unavailable, infants should be fed an iron-fortified commercial infant formula (i.e., labeled "with iron") regulated by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), which is based on standards that ensure nutrient content and safety. Infant formulas are designed to meet the nutritional needs of infants and are not needed beyond age 12 months. It is important to take precautions to ensure that expressed human milk and prepared infant formula are handled and stored safely (see "**Proper Handling and Storage of Human Milk and Infant Formula**").

Donor Human Milk

If families do not have sufficient human milk for their infant but want to feed their infant human milk, they may look for alternative ways to obtain it. It is important for the family to obtain pasteurized donor human milk from a source, such as an accredited human milk bank, that has screened its donors and taken appropriate safety precautions. When human milk is obtained directly from individuals or through the internet, the donor is unlikely to have been screened for infectious diseases, and it is unknown whether the human milk has been collected or stored in a way to reduce possible safety risks to the baby. More information is available at **fda.gov/science-research/pediatrics/use-donor-human-milk**.