Should I use breast milk or baby formula? The discussion about what to feed the baby has been going on for a long time. In fact, it's nearly as old as the first U.S. commercially prepared infant formula in powdered form that has been available since the late 1800s. And that's where the story begins. Here are highlights from the history of baby formula, from breastfeeding and cow's milk, which has been in the mix too.

So when was baby formula invented?

Late 1800s: Commercially prepared infant formula in powdered form is born. Because it's expensive, however, many parents can't afford it. From now through the 1930s and the Great Depression, most infants are breastfed through their first year. If they're given infant formula, it's homemade from cow's milk or from evaporated milk. Starting in 1929, during the year of the great stock market crash, soy formula also becomes available for babies allergic to cow' milk.

1938: A watershed in U.S. history, the 1938 Food, Drug and Cosmetic Act is enacted. It pioneered policies to protect consumer's
economic wellbeing and created food standards to unify the identity, quality, and quantity of food in containers, to level the playing field regarding the value consumers could expect. (More on the Food, Drug and Cosmetic Act will be shared in a minute.)

1940s: Most infants are breastfed until six months then fed cow's milk after that. Homemade formula, though, is still popular among babies under six months old who aren't breastfed. Breastfeeding rates begin to slowly decline.

1951: Commercially prepared infant formula becomes available in concentrated form and moms love the convenience. Liquid concentrate infant formula is the predominant form of infant formula sold for the next 20 years. Still, in the early 1950s, most infants are breastfed until six months then switched to cow's milk because it's less expensive than formula.

1958: Breastfeeding is out of favor. According to a national mail-back survey conducted in 1958, only 30 percent of mother of young infants reported their babies were either completely or partially breastfed at one week of age.


1970s: Breastfeeding rates continue to decline as more women enter the job market. Fewer than 25 percent of infants in the United States are breastfed in the hospital compared to today's standard of 75 percent. An article in the New York Times published April 8,
1973, reports the World Health Organization (WHO) deplores the trend, suggesting the Western "fashion" of not breastfeeding is being diffused to the rest of the world. Typically infants who aren't breastfed are given commercially prepared infant formula until they are four to six months old, then switched to cow’s milk because it's cheaper than formula.

1980: Breastfeeding is back in favor because of numerous government reports citing the advantages of breastfeeding. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services establishes its first ever national health objective for breastfeeding. The goal: By 1990, 75 percent of women breastfeed in the hospital and 35 percent are still nursing when their babies are six months old.

Meanwhile, on September 26, 1980, the Infant Formula Act of 1980, an amendment of the Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act of 1938, is signed into law by President Jimmy Carter. This amendment regulates infant formula to ensure the safety and nutrition of infant formulas. It establishes minimum, and in some cases, maximum, nutrient levels for infant formula, standardizing the nutritional content across all brands. The Act also mandates quality control procedures for producing infant formula and gives the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) the authority to enforce standards for infant formula across the nation.

1982: Breastfeeding rates peak, with 62 percent of moms initiating breastfeeding and 30 percent continuing to breastfeed six months later.

1989: Carnation® and Gerber®, two leading formula name-brands,
begin advertising new baby formulas directly to consumers through TV commercials, print ads, and coupons. Health-care professionals express concern that this practice will negatively impact breastfeeding rates and infant health. Previously, infant formula companies in the United States marketed their formula to health-care professionals only. Only 52.2 percent of moms initiate breastfeeding and 19.6 continue until their baby is at least six months old.

1990s: Breastfeeding rates rise again throughout the 1990s as more women begin to initiate breastfeeding in the hospital and other public education campaigns and promotional efforts influence infant feeding. Formula sales dip in the mid-1990s by 10 percent then hold steady.

1997: Store Brand Infant Formulas enter the marketplace. Store Brand Formulas like Parent's Choice meet the exacting standards of the FDA as outlined in the Infant Formula Act, yet cost up to 50 percent less* than nationally advertised brands. Store Brand formulas also meet the nutritional levels recommended by the U.S. National Academy of Sciences-National Research Council and the American Academy of Pediatrics.

2000: Breastfeeding rates peak again; 68 percent of moms initiate breastfeeding in the hospital; 31 percent are still breastfeeding their babies at six months of age.

2001: Health-care professionals begin to recognize Store Brand Formula. According to a 2001 study in Pediatric Nursing:
"Health-care professionals must help mothers determine what type of formula to feed their child, such as an iron-fortified, milk-based formula or a soy-based formula. It is also key to realize that the Federal Food and Drug Administration tightly regulates infant formula so they are all nutritionally equivalent. The only significant difference among today's term formula options is price. Most leading retailers around the country carry a store brand of formula that bears the store's name that's...regulated by the FDA, and available at a significant savings."

**2011**: The U.S. Surgeon General, Regina M. Benjamin, M.D., issues a "Call to Action to Support Breastfeeding," outlining steps to remove some of the obstacles women who want to breastfeed their babies may face, such as encouraging employers to allow nursing moms to have their babies close by so they can feed them during the day.

Today: Breastfeeding is going strong; 75 percent of moms start out breastfeeding in the hospital and 47 percent are still at it six months later. Still, baby formula continues to be popular too. According to the United States Department of Agriculture, more than 80 percent of infants three to 11 months old in the United States are fed at least some infant formula. The volume of infant formula sold in the United States is approximately 28 billion ounces per year.

As you can see, breastfeeding and formula-feeding rates have fluctuated for more than 100 years, coinciding with formula-feeding practices, which have fallen in and out of favor. The debate about what to do and which is best is likely to continue for as long as...
there are babies and the availability of both breast milk and infant formula. Overall, what to feed the baby is a personal choice that depends on you, your situation, your values, your baby, and other factors. Because infant formulas have become so nutritionally complete, cow's milk for infants is a thing of the past. It isn't recommended anymore for babies until after their first birthday because straight cow's milk can be difficult for babies to digest. And unlike breast milk or formula, cow's milk doesn't contain the crucial nutrients vital for a baby's first year of life. That's one less decision you have to make compared to your parent's or their parent's generations, which narrows the field to just three options for infants: breast milk, formula, or a combination of the two with supplemental formula-feeding.

About the Author

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