

The Distractible Baby

Is my baby distractible?

Latch on, suck a moment, pull off... latch on, suck a moment, pull off. Nurse a minute, pull away to smile at mom. Nurse a minute, pull away to see who just walked in the room. Nurse a minute, pull away to listen to the TV. Nurse a moment, pull away because the dog wagged his tail. **Sound familiar??** Baby starts to nurse and just as soon as your milk starts to let-down, baby pulls off and wiggles around in your lap. Babies aged two to six months are notorious for pulling off the breast at any distraction (real or imaginary) and tend to forget to let go before they turn around (ouch!).

This is a passing developmental stage that can be quite a nuisance – it's usually at it's worst between four and five months. At around 2 months, your baby will become able to see things clearly across the room. At around 3 months, he'll start to stay awake longer and take a greater interest in the world around him. Your baby is also beginning to recognize that he is separate from mom. All of these things can result in a distractible baby. When baby first becomes aware of the rest of the world, he will have a hard time concentrating on nursing. In effect, he will be unable to "walk and chew gum at the same time." Once he gets a little older, he'll find it easier to both nurse and take in the world around him at the same time.

Distractibility is also common around 8-10 months, and can lead mom to think that her baby is trying to wean. If your baby is younger than a year, it's highly unlikely that this temporary disinterest is self-weaning. It's very rare for a baby younger than 12 months to self-wean.

What can I do about it?

Many moms find it more and more difficult to nurse a distractible baby, and sometimes even interpret it personally ("I don't want mom any more" or "I don't want to nurse any more"). At the very least, it's frustrating to deal with a distractible baby. Less frequent/shorter nursing during this distractible stage can lead to a low milk supply, so do your best to get in a few decent feedings during the day.

Until this stage has passed, baby may need a quiet place to nurse and/or more night nursing until he's figured out how to deal with distraction. *Do* take advantage of night nursing during this time – it doesn't matter *when* baby takes in his calories during a 24-hour period. One study showed that older babies can consume as much as 25% of their total daily intake of mother's milk during the night, probably partly because of daytime distractibility.

Nursing in a quiet, darkened, boring room often helps. Talk in quiet, soothing tones (if you talk at all). Nurse while lying down; nap nurse. Cover baby with a shawl or put him in a sling to nurse. Nursing while in motion (walking, rocking) can also help baby to focus better on nursing. Try to catch your baby when he's more willing, such as when he's just waking up, already a little sleepy, or actually asleep. Baby's initial pulling off is probably not an indication that he is finished – just an indication that he saw/heard something interesting across the room. When he pulls off, try to coax him back to the breast a few more times before giving up.

If baby pulls away without letting go, keep a finger ready to break the suction as soon as he starts to pull away. You can also nurse baby in the football (clutch) hold so you have better control of his head, or nurse him in the cradle hold in a sling.

If baby is not nursing as much because of distractibility, offer the breast often (even when he doesn't "ask" to nurse). Make up for lost time by nursing more often during the night. Older babies may nurse better if you try different and novel nursing positions in which they have more control – baby standing up, sitting on your lap facing you, etc.