

Breastfeeding the Preterm Baby

QUESTION: Why does my preterm baby need my breast milk?

ANSWER: Your milk is the one thing only you can give your baby. Preterm babies who don't receive their mother's milk may get sick more often and more severely. Later on, they also may have more vision or bone problems and developmental delays. Your milk provides your baby with nutrition, antibodies, enzymes and growth factors that no other food can give your baby:

- **Nutrients:** When you give birth early, your milk is higher in many of the nutrients that your baby needs, such as protein and iron.
- **Antibodies:** Live cells, that help protect your baby against infection and disease and strengthen your baby's immune system.
- **Enzymes:** To help your baby digest food.
- **Growth factors:** To help your baby's digestive system mature and work well.

QUESTION: I want to breastfeed my baby but my baby isn't able to yet. What should I do?

ANSWER: Get started with building up your milk supply. It is important to establish a full milk supply in the first few weeks after having your baby. This starts with pumping within 6 hours of delivery. Double pump using a multi-user, hospital-grade pump provided by your hospital. Your goal is to pump 8-10 times each 24 hours. The first few days you will only make a few drops to a few teaspoonsful of colostrum each time you pump. Over the next several days, the colostrum will change to thin, white breast milk and you will start making ounces instead of teaspoons. Keep this milk volume goal in mind: 750-1050 mL (25-35 oz.) each 24 hours by the time your baby is 2 weeks old. Keep a pumping log so you can see how your milk production is changing.

For more information on reaching full milk production with a breast pump, read, *Reaching a Full Milk Production with a Breast Pump* found on www.ameda.com.

Your milk is the one thing only you can give your baby. Start pumping soon after birth to build a full supply for when your baby is ready to breastfeed.



QUESTION: Will I be able to breastfeed my preterm baby?

ANSWER: Yes. Be patient. Here are the steps mothers of preterm babies usually go through before their baby is able to breastfeed:

1. Pumping to establish and maintain milk supply.
2. Holding their baby skin to skin, also known as kangaroo care. This calms your baby and is the first step to getting closer to breastfeeding your baby.
3. Letting the baby practice breastfeeding, known as non-nutritive sucking.
4. Breastfeeding a few times a day. Your baby will probably receive some feedings through a feeding tube, by bottle or other feeding system a few times a day.
5. Exclusive breastfeeding.

QUESTION: When can my baby start to breastfeed?

ANSWER: When your baby can start to breastfeed depends on how early your baby was born and her health. Your hospital may also have policies that affect when you start breastfeeding. Research has shown that most babies:

- at 28 weeks, can root at the breast and latch-on
- at 31 weeks, can suck and get some milk
- by 36 weeks, can fully breastfeed

QUESTION: What can I expect when I start breastfeeding my baby?

ANSWER: At first, your baby may just lick at your nipple and not latch. Be patient. Although she has instincts, she needs to learn what to do. Preterm babies also need time to grow and develop their muscles and coordination to latch, suck, swallow and breathe while breastfeeding.

For practice breastfeeding (non-nutritive sucking), your baby’s health care provider may even ask you to pump before attempting to breastfeed the first few times. This is to drain most of the milk out of your breasts so your baby doesn’t get overwhelmed with the flow of milk.

Once your baby is able to breastfeed and get milk, your lactation consultant may recommend using a nipple shield.

QUESTION: What is a nipple shield?

ANSWER: A nipple shield is a thin cover with small holes in the tip, placed over the nipple. It can be used when your preterm baby learns to breastfeed. Research has shown that using a nipple shield while breastfeeding a preterm baby can help them remove more milk.



Your milk is powerful. Your milk helps provide nutrition and protection against infection. Your milk helps your baby grow.

QUESTION: Will my baby be able to exclusively breastfeed when she is discharged from the hospital?

ANSWER: That depends on how early your baby was born. Some babies need to receive extra nutrients for a few weeks or a few months after they are discharged from the hospital. These extra nutrients help your baby grow since she was born early. This may mean that you have to mix some of your milk with fortifier which can be given to your baby after she breastfeeds. Talk to you baby’s health care provider and your lactation consultant to learn more.

This is general information and does not replace the advice of your healthcare provider. If you have a problem you cannot solve quickly, seek help right away. Every baby is different, if in doubt, contact your physician or other healthcare provider.

References
American Academy of Pediatrics Section on Breastfeeding. Breastfeeding and the use of human milk. Pediatrics. 2012;129(3):e827-841.
Jones F. Best Practice for Expressing, Storing and Handling Human Milk. 3rd ed. Fort Worth, TX: HMBANA, Inc.; 2011.