

Baby-Led Feeding

“Can I do it?”... Yes, you can! And here’s how.

After your baby is born the nurses and doctors will encourage you to feed your baby “on cue”. **What does this mean?** Instead of feeding your baby by the clock...every 3 hours, for example...it is best to feed the baby when she shows signs that she is ready to eat. In this way she will feed as often as she needs to thrive and grow. When your baby nurses, she will also signal to your breasts just how much milk to make. Your breasts will respond to your baby’s demand for food by making exactly the amount that she needs. If you limit feeds “to the clock” this interferes with your baby’s ability to “tell” your breasts how much milk to make. So let your baby nurse whenever she wants.



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How will I know when to feed my baby?

Babies are smart! They give their parents “**cues**” or signs to let them know when they are ready to eat *before* they start to cry. As your baby moves from deep sleep to a light sleep, before waking up, you might notice fluttery eye movements (Rapid Eye Movement) while her eyes are still closed. REM sleep means your baby will soon be waking to eat.

What other early signs or “feeding cues” should I look for?

- Smacking or licking lips.
- Opening and closing mouth.
- Sucking on lips, tongue, hands, and fingers.
- If you pick up your baby and place him tummy facing you, with his head on your chest, he will sense that he is with you and he will bounce his chin against your chest looking for the breast that will feed him.
- Hand to mouth movement (even if his eyes are closed) including sucking on his hand or fingers.
- Rooting (when his cheek is touched he will turn toward the touch with searching movements of the mouth).

And late signs of hunger include:

- Moving his head frantically from side to side.
- Crying—and if your baby is too upset he will have a harder time latching on to the breast to feed well—resulting in more crying!

So try to catch your baby early in this cycle, just as he starts to wake and “tell” you that he is now ready to eat. This is when he will be most patient as he learns about breastfeeding, helping him to latch easily and well.

How many times should my baby eat every day? Although you should avoid feeding by the clock, it is important that your baby eats at least 8-12 times per day, in the early weeks of breastfeeding. She may “cluster feed” with several feeds close together and then take a longer gap. This is normal. Keep a **Breastfeeding Diary** in the first weeks. Some babies are sleepy in the newborn period. So if you notice that your baby is waking to eat fewer than 8 times in 24 hours then you will need to gently rouse her to eat more often.

How will I know how long to feed my baby? Again, let your baby be your guide. When she has emptied the first breast or when she is full and satisfied, she will release the nipple. As you burp her, watch for further feeding cues. Is she still “rooting” or bouncing her chin on your chest? Are her hands clenched in fists? Or is she asleep and very relaxed? If she is still awake and putting a hand in her mouth, she is letting you know that she needs to feed from your other breast, too. It is important for you to notice that the baby is swallowing as she suckles. Swallows will be infrequent during the first few days, but very obvious and frequent after that. Your breasts will feel softer after nursing. But you do not need to time your baby’s feeds. The next feed, start on the breast you did not start on last time.

Frequent feeds in the first few weeks trigger the release of lots of the milk-making hormone - Prolactin. This hormone finishes off the “milk-making factory” in your breasts...setting up a good supply. After the first few weeks it is the **emptying** of the breasts that signal them to make more. So the more the baby eats, the more milk your breasts will make. Watching the clock, rather than your baby, disrupts this system and could lead to you making too little milk for your baby.

So to ensure that your baby gets plenty to eat and that you make all the milk she needs...**let your baby lead**. You just need to watch her for signs that she is waking and is ready to eat. And as pacifiers can mask these feeding cues, they are best avoided in the early weeks.