

# The Importance of Early Initiation of Breastfeeding

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

- Immediately after birth most babies are in a quiet, alert state and eager to nurse. They instinctively search for the breast and usually latch easily, have a good meal of colostrum, and then settle to sleep and recover from the labor and delivery. The baby’s suckling stimulates the release of Oxytocin. This hormone speeds the delivery of the placenta, reducing blood loss in the mother, as well as hurrying colostrum (the first milk) to the nipple for the baby to drink. This first meal announces to the mother’s breasts that there is now a baby to feed, and they get to work finishing off the “milk-making factory”.
- After this first time it is important to feed frequently! More breastfeeding at first means more milk later.



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In the first hour after birth babies are usually eager to nurse, latch easily, and have a good first meal.

- Researchers have found that babies who are breastfed more often in the first 24 hours have less weight loss, more stools, less jaundice, and take in more milk during the first 5 days of life.
- The frequent feedings of normal breastfeeding may feel a little overwhelming but if the baby feeds well and often in the early days, common problems are avoided.
- When breastfeeding is delayed or restricted, or when the baby does not feed well, a mother may experience painful breast engorgement about 3 to 4 days after birth when milk volume increases many times over. Or there could be a delay in her milk “coming in” on Days 3 or 4.

- During the first few days after birth the mother’s breasts are softer and less full of milk. These are easy breasts for newborn babies to learn to latch and nurse on. When milk production increases on Days 3 through 5, the breasts become much firmer and more challenging to attach to. Lots of feeds in the first few days ensure that the baby is a “pro” before this happens.

Before birth, your baby is fed continuously by the placenta and never feels hungry. After birth your baby will experience hunger and will use his gut for the first time. Instead of being fed continuously there are now gaps between feedings. Lots of breastfeeding in the early days makes this transition easier for your baby.

Nature helps your baby start off gradually. Colostrum (the early breastmilk packed with antibodies) is digested quickly, helping his digestive system start to work. At birth the baby’s stomach is the size of a cherry and cannot easily stretch to hold more than a teaspoon at a time. Frequent feedings of small amounts of colostrum matches the small stomach size. Over the first days of life, the stomach stretches so that when your breasts fill with much more milk, a few days after birth, your baby will be able to manage larger amounts.

Not only does early and frequent breastfeeding help your baby transition to life after birth, it also gets your breasts off to a great start towards making lots and lots of milk.

### **How does milk-making get started?**

When the baby suckles on the breast, signals are sent to the brain to release an important hormone called Prolactin. The more often the baby feeds in the first days and weeks after birth the more Prolactin receptor sites are made on the milk-making cells, and the better the “milk-making factory” will be. So the more breastfeeding in the early days, the more milk will be available in the coming months. Oxytocin is another hormone that is released during suckling. It causes the muscles around the milk cells in the breast to squeeze milk down the milk ducts to the baby...this is called milk “let-down” or “milk ejection reflex”.

After the first week or two the hormone Prolactin becomes less important in maintaining continuing milk production. At this point, the amount of breastmilk made by the breasts is based on “supply and demand”. As the baby suckles, the breast delivers the milk, then more milk is made to replace what was taken. If the baby keeps asking for more milk, the breasts keep making more milk.

So relax, lay back, respond to your baby’s feeding cues, feed frequently, and you will set the stage to make all the milk your baby needs now and in the coming months!