

The Importance of Exclusive Breastfeeding in the First Week of Life

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



From photo by David Goodman ©2013Karen Twyman

“Exclusive breastfeeding” means feeding only breast milk to your baby.

Why is it important to exclusively breastfeed in the first week of life? During the first week, you and your baby will learn how to nurse *and* establish a good milk supply. Parents are sometimes tempted to offer their baby formula, in the first day or two, before the mother’s milk increases in volume on Day 3 or Day 4. Or they might plan to breastfeed *and* bottle feed so that mom can get some extra rest. Unfortunately, parents are often unaware that mixing formula

feeding with breastfeeding can interfere with their baby becoming a good breastfeeder *and* with the mother making lots of milk.

Establishing a great milk supply.

When a newborn baby is fed formula between breastfeeds, she will nurse less often, and then her mother’s breasts do not get the stimulation they need to become good milk producers.

To trigger milk production, babies need to suckle at their mother’s breasts frequently in the first days of life. The baby’s suckling signals the mother’s brain to release the hormone, Prolactin. Prolactin then travels, in the blood stream, to the breasts, where it stimulates the milk-making cells into production. The more often Prolactin is sent to the breasts, the better the “milk making factory” will be. More suckling means more milk.

But will my baby get enough to eat before my “milk comes in”?

Parents sometimes worry that their baby is not getting enough to eat during the first days of life because big-time milk production has not begun. However, breasts start making colostrum (the early milk) in the last months of pregnancy and, though small in amount, this is all a healthy newborn needs. Healthy newborns are prepared for a few days of small meals. They have the stores on board (glycogen in their liver, extra fat stores, and they are well hydrated) to last them until their mother’s milk volume increases 20 fold on Days 3 or 4. The ounce or so of colostrum that a newborn baby drinks in her first day of life is quite enough. It is packed with antibodies to help “finish off” her immune system. It provides all the nutrients she needs. By Day 4 her appetite will snowball, and she will need 15 to 20 times as much milk as she did on

Day 1. And by Days 4 or 5, that is how much milk her mom will be producing, *if* she nursed frequently from birth.

The “2nd night Blues”.

About 48 hours after birth the baby’s appetite increases. This often coincides with the baby’s second night. She may be fussy and want to nurse very frequently. The extra suckling helps stimulate mom’s milk production. Fortunately, by the third night more milk is available and the baby will be more satisfied. A bottle of formula on the second night reduces how much a baby nurses that night, and mom’s breasts may respond by making less milk than her baby needs.

Other Benefits of Exclusive Breastsfeeding.

Exclusive breastfeeding protects the baby’s immature gut - lining it and stopping bacteria, viruses and undigested proteins from crossing into the baby’s blood stream. In this way, breastfeeding, without supplementation, reduces the risk of infections and allergies.

Breastfeeding in mom’s arms (especially skin-to-skin) stabilizes the baby’s temperature, breathing rate, and blood sugar. It also provides a comforting transition to life outside the uterus.

Small feeds are what the baby expects in the first days of life. Her stomach is the size of a cherry on Day 1 and expands to handle much bigger feeds by the end of the first week. Feeds over a teaspoon or two on Day 1 and 2 can lead to regurgitation and discomfort for the baby.

Exclusive breastfeeding in the first week, allows babies to learn to become good at latching and nursing before breasts become much firmer and fuller and more challenging on Days 3 or 4.

Milk flow is slow on Days 1 and 2. After a bottle feed, with its much faster flow of milk, babies can become frustrated by the slow milk flow at the breast, and this interferes with their learning to nurse. It can take time to coax them into accepting the breast again.

The more babies breastfeed, the less likelihood of painful engorgement (over-filling) of the breasts on Days 3 and 4. Frequent nursing prevents and relieves engorgement...while supplementing with formula keeps babies from nursing, causing and prolonging engorgement.

The hormone Prolactin and Oxytocin, released during breastfeeding promote feelings of wellbeing, calmness and love. And Oxytocin helps contract mom’s uterus back to its pre-pregnant size, slowing blood loss.

Exclusive breastfeeding provides your baby with all the nutrients and protective factors, growth factors, and hormones that she needs to grow and be healthy, including 190 different fatty acids (not just DHA and ARA).

And finally, colostrum is a laxative. The more the baby consumes the more quickly the black, tarry “meconium” stool is passed, which also reduces the likelihood of jaundice.