

Breastfeeding - when to start

Breastfeeding should ideally start soon after your baby is born. A baby is usually alert after birth and will spontaneously seek the breast if left undisturbed in skin-to-skin contact with their mother's body. Research suggests that a mother should allow her baby to feed when the baby shows it is ready. This may be before they are weighed, bathed and dressed.

When this is not possible, skin-to-skin contact between mother and baby that allows 'getting-to-know-you' time can occur later, prior to breastfeeds.

Breastfeeding within the first hour

Breastfeeding within the first hour or so after birth is important because:

- It makes you as the mother more confident that you can breastfeed.
- Your baby starts to receive the immunological effects of colostrum (the first breastmilk, which provides protection against infection and disease).
- Your baby's digestion and bowels are stimulated.
- Sucking difficulties may be avoided if the baby feeds properly at this stage.
- The bond between you and your baby is enhanced.

Breastfeeding after a caesarean section

If you have given birth to your baby by caesarean section:

- The first breastfeed may occur in the operating room with the baby passed under the sterile drapes while you are being stitched up. When this is not possible, it will commonly occur in the recovery room, as soon as possible after delivery, or as soon as you return to your room.
- The feeding behaviour of your baby may be affected if you have had a general or epidural anaesthetic.
- The midwife should stay with you during breastfeeding if you are on intravenous drugs to relieve pain.

What to do if your baby will not latch on

If your baby will not latch on or suckle within the first hour:

- Express colostrum directly into your baby's mouth or give it by teaspoon or cup. This can stimulate your baby to seek the breast.
- Gently stroke your baby on their abdomen and legs, to help your baby to wake and seek the breast.
- Hold your baby close and have lots of skin-to-skin contact.

Your baby may be very sleepy for the next 24 hours

It is normal for babies to become very sleepy after their first feed. Putting your baby skin-to-skin on your chest can help them to waken and seek the breast for a feed. If sleepiness persists after the first day or so, you will need to wake your baby at least every three to four hours for a feed.

Avoid dummies and bottles in the early days

Dummies and bottles can interfere with your baby's ability to attach properly to the breast. This can lead to:

- Breast engorgement
- Breast refusal
- Low weight gain
- Blocked milk ducts and breast inflammation (mastitis)
- Premature weaning.

Exclusive breastfeeding promotes strong sucking, which is vital for milk production. It also helps your body return to its pre-pregnant state.

Infant formulas

The use of artificial milk formulas, when there is no medical reason for doing so, can:

- Interfere with the establishment and maintenance of successful breastfeeding
- Increase the risk that your baby will become sensitive to cow's milk protein or other allergies
- Reduce the length of time you spend breastfeeding
- Increase the risk of upper respiratory tract infection, ear infections, heart disease and obesity.

If your baby needs complementary feeds, try to use expressed breastmilk.

Where to get help

- Your midwife
- A lactation consultant – contact the Lactation Consultants of Australia and New Zealand
- An Australian Breastfeeding Association breastfeeding counsellor Tel. 1800 mum 2 mum (686 2 686)
- Your maternal and child health nurse
- Maternal and Child Health Line (24 hours) Tel. 132 229
- Your doctor.

Things to remember

- Breastfeeding within the first hour after birth has many benefits for your baby.
- Avoid the use of dummies and bottles, as they can prevent your baby from attaching properly to the breast.
- Avoid infant formulas if possible, as they may reduce the duration of breastfeeding and make your baby sensitive to cow's milk.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Australian Breastfeeding Association

Content on this website is provided for education and information purposes only. Information about a therapy, service, product or treatment does not imply endorsement and is not intended to replace advice from your doctor or other registered health professional. Content has been prepared for Victorian residents and wider Australian audiences, and was accurate at the time of publication. Readers should note that, over time, currency and completeness of the information may change. All users are urged to always seek advice from a registered health care professional for diagnosis and answers to their medical questions.

For the latest updates and more information, visit www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

Copyright © 1999/2012 State of Victoria. Reproduced from the Better Health Channel (www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au) at no cost with permission of the Victorian Minister for Health. Unauthorised reproduction and other uses comprised in the copyright are prohibited without permission.