

Providing Milk for Your NICU Baby: Getting Started

For all mothers, getting off to a good start with lactation in the first two weeks after birth is key to a long-lasting abundant milk supply.

When a baby is admitted to the NICU, mothers have extra challenges, including 1) use of a breast pump until the baby can feed at the breast, 2) coping with the stress of the NICU admission and 3) a higher risk of pregnancy and birth complications themselves. The following guidelines that are specific to NICU mothers will help you get started making milk for your baby.

1. Start breast stimulation as soon as possible after birth

In full-term, uncomplicated births, babies begin breastfeeding in the delivery room within minutes after birth. This practice has been linked with increases in milk supply both in the short-term and long-term. Studies show similar results for mothers of premature babies who start using a breast pump within the first hours after birth. They make more milk both in the early days and through to 6 weeks after birth.

2. Use a hospital-grade electric breast pump.

The full-term breastfeeding baby uses a special sucking pattern during the early days after birth that relies on suction — or creating a pulling feeling in the breast. This sensation is very important for the breasts and is different from hand expression of milk. Hospital-grade electric pumps provide a suction pattern like the full-term baby.

3. Use the breast pump as often as your health permits during and after your maternity hospitalization.

Research shows that the more often a NICU mother uses the breast pump in the first 5 days after birth, the more likely she is to make plenty of milk by the end of the second week. While we recommend at least 8 pumpings each day during the first 5 days, some NICU mothers cannot do this because of pregnancy and birth complications or other health problems. If 8 pumpings are not possible, try for at least 5 each day.



4. Do not set an alarm to wake up at night to use the breast pump.

This guideline is different from mothers in the home who wake to feed their babies at night. Mothers of NICU babies are often sick themselves and have difficulty sleeping due to the stress of their baby's condition. Pain and fatigue work against milk-making efforts, so it is important to balance pumping with your own care, especially during the **getting started phase**. A good rule is to pump when you awaken at night instead of using an alarm clock. Call the nursery, check on your baby, use the breast pump and try to sleep again. Set a goal for at least 5 frequent pumpings each day, with one longer stretch of 5-6 hours of sleep at night. As your breasts begin to make more milk, they will become your nighttime “alarm clock” because the fullness will wake you up to pump. Also, when you feel better, try to add an extra daily pumping, reaching as close to 8 pumpings a day as possible.

5. Spend as much time in the NICU with your baby as possible.

Spending time at your baby's bedside and holding him/her in Kangaroo Care will help boost the release of milk-making hormones from your brain. Use the breast pump at your baby's NICU bedside, and make pumping a special time between you and your baby. Each day, when you arrive in the NICU, use the breast pump right away, and use it again before you go home. If you spend several hours in the NICU, pump every 2-3 hours. These frequent NICU pumpings will help you reach your daily goal for breast pump use.

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We look forward to your inquiry at: contact@lactahub.org