

What is a “Normal” Amount of Milk to Pump for my NICU Baby?

Mothers with babies in the NICU see their pumped milk, and wonder how much milk is normal. There are lots of normal amounts along the way to a full milk supply, but the first 2 weeks after birth is the most important time to understand.

Why are the first 2 weeks so important?

Many key changes take place in your breasts and body hormones that *turn on* the milk-making process. These changes require breast stimulation to build and keep a good milk supply.

- This 2 week period is called **coming to volume**, or reaching a pumped milk volume of at least 500 mLs (17 ounces or 2-1/4 cups) each day.
- **Coming to volume** is the most important goal if you want your baby to receive only your milk through to discharge from the NICU.

Why 500 mLs? My baby is fed much smaller amounts of milk.

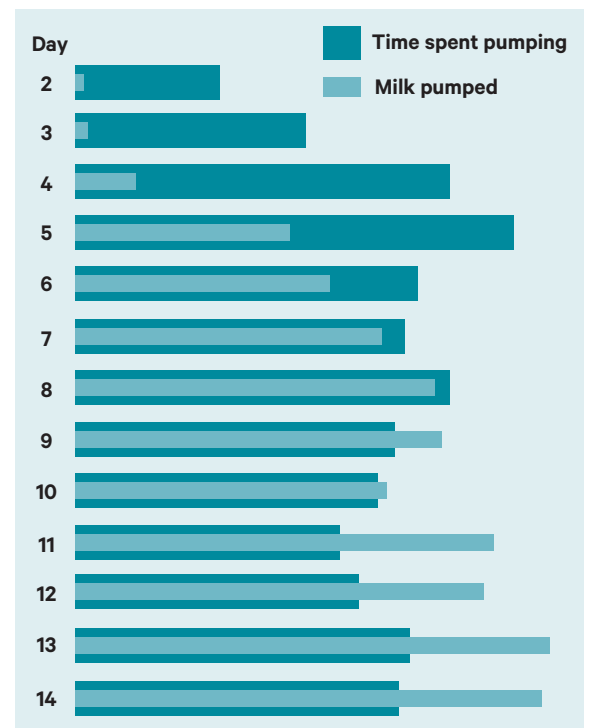
In the first 2 weeks of life, most NICU babies need much smaller amounts of milk than do full-term babies who feed from the breast.

- At the end of this 2 week period, your baby might need only 100-150 mLs of milk each day, whereas a full-term baby drinks at least 500-600 mLs from the breast. Even though your baby may need less milk, your breasts need to make the same amount of milk as the mother who breastfeeds her full-term baby.
- The rule of **supply and demand**, in which the breasts **supply** the amount of milk that the baby **demand**s, does not apply to a NICU mother who is using a breast pump. Instead, the breast pump must create the **demand** that your body needs to build and maintain a good, long-lasting **supply** of milk for your baby.
- The extra milk that you make in the early days can be frozen and fed to your baby up to several months later.

How does milk volume increase over the first 2 weeks after birth?

Most mothers make very small amounts of milk — often just drops — in the first 2-3 days after birth. However, milk volume usually increases very fast after that.

- Do not get discouraged if you pump frequently, but get little or no milk at first. This does not mean that you will have problems with milk volume later on.
- Milk volume increases from a few drops to 500 mLs or more in the first 1-2 weeks after birth, but the amount and timing of this increase differs among mothers. Mothers who have been sick themselves, or have had pregnancy and birth complications, often have a slower increase in milk volume.
- The graph below shows the most common pattern of milk volume increase for mothers of NICU babies who use a breast pump. The colored bars for each day (2-14) show the amount of time spent pumping (dark green) and the amount of milk removed that day (light green). The graph shows that in the first 3-4 days, the mother spends a lot of time pumping (dark green), but gets very little milk (light green). Then, in just one day (between days 4 and 5) her milk volume increases over three-fold, from 90 mLs to 300 mLs! By day 11, the colored bars are reversed. The mother now spends less time pumping each day but removes lots more milk (600-700 mLs). In short: A lot of pumping in the early days pays off with lots more milk by the end of 2 weeks!



Meier et al. (2016). *J Perinatol* 36: 493-499.

Meier et al. (2017). *Clin Perinatol* 44: 1-22.

Hoban et al. (2018). *Breastfeed Med* 13:135-141.



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