

# What Should I Know about Feeding my Premature Baby at the Breast in the NICU?

**Mothers of premature babies spend several weeks pumping milk, looking forward to the day that feeding at the breast can start.**

NICUs have different policies about when breastfeeding can begin, and much depends upon the baby's overall condition. These tips will help you plan for early breastfeeding experiences in the NICU.

## **1. Plan to breastfeed at your baby's bedside.**

Most premature babies remain on monitors and other equipment during feedings, so you will need to sit where the wires and tubing can reach you. Ask for a comfortable chair and extra pillows to support your back and arms. The nurse will help you make the space as private as possible.

## **2. Begin the breastfeeding about half an hour before your baby's scheduled gavage feeding.**

Your baby is likely to be the most awake and ready to try breastfeeding at this time.

## **3. Plan to feed from the breast that is most comfortable for you.**

Mothers with full-term babies are told to change the order of the first breast each time they feed. This is not the case with premature babies. You should feed from the breast that is most comfortable for you and easiest for your baby. For example, most mothers say that one breast has more milk or has a faster milk flow. Babies may prefer lying on one side to feed, or are more able to latch onto one nipple than the other.

## **4. Remove a little milk before breastfeeding if needed.**

If your baby is very small or there is concern about his/her drinking too much milk or choking with a fast milk flow, you can pump some milk right before breastfeeding.

## **5. Use a breastfeeding position that supports your baby's head, neck and shoulders.**

The education sheet, *What are the Best Breastfeeding Positions for my Premature Baby?*, explains why this is important and shows pictures.



## **6. Do not expect your baby to take an entire feeding.**

The goal of the earliest NICU breastfeedings is to become skilled and confident about positioning your baby, so you can relax and let your milk flow. Most premature babies drink very small amounts from the breast at first, sometimes just drops. Rest assured that extra milk will be given after breastfeeding so that your baby will not be hungry.

## **7. Let your baby fall asleep at the breast while extra milk is given by gavage.**

When your baby is done feeding, he or she will stop sucking and relax or sleep, enjoying the smell of your milk and the closeness of the breast. The gavage feeding with your extra milk can be given while your baby sleeps at the breast.

## **8. Pump both breasts after breastfeeding.**

Most premature babies do not remove all of the milk in the breast and fall asleep before the breasts receive enough stimulation to make more milk. Pumping will protect your milk supply and prevent problems with plugged ducts or mastitis.

## **9. Be patient with your baby's progress.**

From week to week as your baby grows, he/she will become more reliable at waking up before feedings, staying awake longer and drinking more milk. Most premature babies begin to feed like full-term babies about two weeks after their expected birth date.



## Disclaimer

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We look forward to your inquiry at: [contact@lactahub.org](mailto:contact@lactahub.org)