

How Does the Nipple Shield Help My Premature Baby Breastfeed?

Premature babies have weak suction pressures compared to healthy full-term babies, but these pressures strengthen as babies mature.

Babies use suction to get and keep a good latch on the breast and to remove milk **effectively** (as completely as possible) and **efficiently** (quickly). The nipple shield helps make up for these weak suction pressures until they strengthen on their own.

What is a nipple shield?

A nipple shield is different from the breast shield that you use with pumping. It is a very thin nipple-shaped covering that is placed over your nipple and areola during breastfeeding. Picture 1 shows the nipple shield on the breast.



Picture 1

How does the nipple shield work?

The nipple shield helps make up for weak suction pressures that cause premature babies to slip off the nipple during breastfeeding. It also helps babies get a good latch, especially if the mother's nipple is short or flat. It is a temporary solution until suction pressures strengthen on their own.

What nipple shield should I use?

Nipple shields come in several brands and sizes. Choose a material that is very thin and food-grade (Picture 1), and avoid older-model rubber and latex nipple shields. The nipple shield should fit easily into your baby's mouth, but not go so far back that he/she chokes or gags. Most premature babies use a size 20 millimeter shield just before and after NICU discharge.

How long will my premature baby need to use the nipple shield?

Most premature babies use the nipple shield until about 2 weeks after their expected birth date. By this time, suction pressures should be about equal to those of a full-term baby. Some babies use the nipple shield for shorter or longer times, and many babies stop using the shield in stages. For example, you may notice your baby is more awake and eager to feed at certain times of day. Try breastfeeding without the shield first, and use it if he/she falls asleep too soon.

Do not cut off the tip of the nipple shield to speed up this process!

What else should I know about using the nipple shield?

- The nipple shield works best with a good milk supply so that milk flows easily through the shield. **The nipple shield does not fix problems with low milk volume.**
- Make sure your nipple is centered in the nipple shield tunnel, and that the nipple tip is not pressed against the side of the shield. Work with a lactation expert and/or view the video: *“Correct Application of the Nipple Shield”* to make sure the nipple shield is on the breast correctly.
- Use a breastfeeding position suitable for premature babies. (See *“What are the Best Breastfeeding Positions for my Premature Baby?”*)
- Wait until your baby opens the mouth widely and then guide the shield gently over your baby's tongue, using your hand and wrist to support his/her head. Your baby's suction will help pull the nipple shield into place.
- Make sure your baby's latch is over the areola, not on the tip of the nipple shield. Use the supporting hand and wrist to keep your baby positioned correctly. (See Picture 2).
- Clean the nipple shield with soap and water and sanitize it once a day along with your breast pump kit. Be sure to squeeze the soapy water through the holes in the nipple shield and rinse well afterward.
- Keep 2-3 extra nipple shields on hand and put them in places you are most likely to breastfeed your baby.
- Remember to use the breast pump several times each day until your baby is drinking plenty of milk from the breast.
- You may hear that using the nipple shield reduces the amount of milk that your baby drinks. While this may be true for healthy full-term babies who do not need the nipple shield, it is not true for a premature baby.



Picture 2



Disclaimer

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