



HELPING YOUR BABY TO BREASTFEED IN THE NICU

PREPARING TO BREASTFEED HOLDING YOUR BABY SKIN-TO-SKIN

Holding your baby against your skin helps your baby to feel secure and stimulates your milk supply. This will prepare you and your baby for breastfeeding.

When your baby is held skin-to-skin you will likely notice them do the following:

- » become more alert
- » suck their lips or fingers
- » move towards your breast.

These are signs that your baby is feeling comfortable and ready to feed. When you think your baby is ready, a nurse can help you to begin.

See also the fact sheet *Skin-to-skin care*

How often should I feed my baby?

Offer your baby breastfeeds every time you think your baby is ready.

Some days your baby might have lots of small feeds over several hours, known as cluster feeding. This is normal for babies. Other days they may be more sleepy. Follow your baby's cues and the staff will help you make sure your baby has at least eight feeds every 24 hours.

As your baby starts to breastfeed you will notice them progress through the following stages:

1. nuzzling and licking your nipple
2. moving towards your breast and then falling asleep
3. taking one or two small sucks, then a few sucks and a swallow
4. sucking and swallowing for a couple of minutes and then for longer periods of times
5. looking for breastfeeds at every feed.

Your baby may not feed as well if they have just had a medical examination or blood test. Holding your baby skin-to-skin will help to settle them and make them feel secure. You can offer them a breastfeed when they are ready.

What if my baby seems to be more interested in sleeping?

If your baby is still asleep three hours after their last feed:

- » Hold your baby skin-to-skin.
- » Gently stroke their back and head to help wake them.
- » Put some expressed breast milk near your baby's nose and mouth so they can smell and taste it.
- » If your baby is not awake the nurse will help to tube feed your baby while you continue skin-to-skin contact.

What about feeding when babies are very premature or sick?

When babies are sick or premature it often takes them longer to be able to breastfeed well. It may take weeks. This is very normal. Spend time with your baby and try to go at their pace. Look for and take pleasure in the small achievements. Feeding should be pleasurable for both you and baby, enjoy the time holding your baby skin-to-skin. Over time your baby will start to feed better.

Starting breastfeeding

If your breasts are very full, the nurse may advise you to express some milk before you start breastfeeding. This will help your baby to start feeding without too much milk flowing into their mouth. Over time, as your baby feeds more, the need to express will lessen. Sometimes your baby will signal to you that they don't want to feed or they want to stop feeding. If you notice any of these signs from your baby, stop feeding and hold your baby in an upright position on your chest. Signs include:

- » their colour changes or their skin becomes mottled
- » coughing, spluttering or gagging
- » arching or stiffening of their body or spreading their fingers widely apart
- » fussing or crying more than normal.

Try resting with your baby skin-to-skin, and when baby is calm again you can try continuing with the feed.

However you might decide to finish this feed by tube and breastfeed again later.

Maintaining your milk supply while your baby is learning to breastfeed

The more you feed or express milk, the more milk you have. So if your baby is still learning how to feed, you will need to express milk to keep up your supply.

Express at least **eight times in 24 hours** while your baby is establishing breastfeeding. Sometimes you will need to express after a breastfeed to help maintain your milk supply.

After you go home you may still need to be expressing as well as feeding until your baby has fully established feeding. The NICU team and your maternal and child health nurse will help you with this.

Support when you go home:

Follow-up breastfeeding support may be helpful for you and your baby. Appointments can be made with the Lactation Consultants before you go home or once you are home on the contact numbers below.

Information and advice

Breastfeeding Service

Royal Women's Hospital
Tel: (03) 8345 2400

Your local Maternal & Child Health Nurse

Victorian Maternal and Child Health Line
T: 13 22 29 (24 hours)

Australian Breastfeeding Association

T: 1800 686 268 Breastfeeding Helpline
www.breastfeeding.asn.au