

ESTABLISHING YOUR MILK SUPPLY

A baby's need for milk and his mother's ability to produce it in just the right quantity have been said to be one of nature's most perfect examples of the law of supply and demand. Until the advent of mass produced artificial formula, the very survival of the human race depended largely on a mother's ability to produce a sufficient quantity of milk to adequately nourish her baby. Establishing and maintaining an ample milk supply is easy when you understand how the milk supply is regulated and what kinds of things are likely to upset the balance between the amount of milk the baby needs and the amount of milk that is produced.

The more the baby nurses, the more milk there will be. This is the key to an abundant milk supply and a contented baby. Milk is produced almost continuously, and the more often the baby nurses, the more milk there will be. Frequent nursing and effective sucking signal the mother's body to produce the amount of milk her baby needs.

Nursing early and often is one of the most important factors in getting breastfeeding off to a good start. Mothers who are permitted to nurse their babies at frequent, unrestricted intervals following birth are more likely to have a good milk supply sooner than mothers who are allowed to nurse only on a restricted feeding schedule.

Newborns usually nurse about every two hours, or at least 8-12 times per day. This frequent nursing provides a wonderful source of comfort as well as nutrition for the newborn, and helps assure that the mother's milk supply will quickly become well established.

Allow the baby to nurse as long as he seems interested, right from the start. Mothers are sometimes advised to limit nursing to five minutes or less during the first week in order to avoid sore nipples. However, it may take the milk two or three minutes to "let down," or start to flow, especially in the beginning, so limiting nursing to five minutes may mean the feeding is over almost before it has begun. A baby needs to nurse long enough to get the hindmilk, the milk that comes toward the end of a feeding that is rich and creamy and high in calories.

Offer both breasts at each feeding, especially in the early weeks. A newborn should be nursing on each breast at least every two to three hours (except for, perhaps, one longer stretch at night) during the time when the milk supply is becoming established. Nurse him until he seems satisfied on the first breast (at least ten to fifteen minutes), then offer the second breast. Next feeding, reverse the order offering the last-used breast first.

Be sure the baby is sucking effectively. In order to draw the milk out and stimulate the breasts to produce more, the baby needs to have a large mouthful of breast tissue. Hold your baby in a comfortable position at the level of your nipple with his whole body facing you, being sure that he doesn't have to turn his head or strain to hold onto the nipple. Wait for the baby to open his mouth very wide, then pull him in close to your breast with your nipple far back in his mouth. The baby who is a "cliff hanger" and chews on the end of the nipple instead of milking the breast will get less milk for his efforts, with a correspondingly smaller amount of milk being produced for the next feeding. Sore nipples may also be a byproduct of improper positioning at the breast.

Continue to nurse as often as your baby indicates the need. Keep in mind that since human milk is perfectly suited to your baby, it will be digested more rapidly and completely than cow's milk (formula), so your breastfed baby will be ready to eat again sooner than his bottle-fed counterpart. Remember the law of supply and demand that is at work here--the more often the baby nurses, the more milk your body will produce.

If you find that your baby regularly sleeps more than three hours between feedings, he may need to be awakened for feedings at least every two hours during the day until your milk supply is well established.

If the baby begins to nurse less frequently, there will be a corresponding drop in milk production. A mother may find her breasts overfull if the baby nurses less often than usual. Hand-expressing the excess milk will make you more comfortable, should you find yourself in this situation. If nursings continue to be spaced farther and farther apart or if the baby nurses less vigorously or for a shorter period of time at each feeding, the milk supply will diminish. The law of supply and demand also works in reverse: the less often the baby nurses, the less milk there will be.

How do I know my baby is getting enough to eat? Sometimes a mother finds herself thinking that her baby is nursing "all the time," and wonders if this means that she doesn't have enough milk to satisfy him. If he has six to eight wet cloth diapers (five to six disposables) and two to five bowel movements per day (beginning the third day after birth) and is not being given anything but your milk, you can be sure he is getting plenty of nourishment. An older baby may have bowel movements less frequently, but they should be plentiful.

Growth spurts or frequency days occur from time to time as the baby goes through a period of rapid growth. Allowing him to nurse more often for two or three days will increase your milk supply to meet his needs.

Remember that newborns nurse for many reasons other than hunger. Your baby may be nursing often because he likes the feeling of security of the close body contact that comes with nursing, because he needs to satisfy his sucking need, or because he finds the sound of your heartbeat and the gentleness of your touch a great source of comfort as he adjusts to his new world.

If you have any further questions or concerns, be sure to contact your La Leche League Leader or other breastfeeding specialist. A baby who is not gaining well should be checked by a doctor.

