

Feeding Your Baby



Eating is an important part of life. For babies who are born early or need to spend time in the hospital, eating by mouth may be hard for them.

We encourage caregivers to be the first to feed their infant. It is an important moment in any baby's life. Our team is here to support you for any help that is needed.

There may be many reasons why eating by mouth is hard for your baby in the NICU. You are an important part of the team. As you care for your baby, you will create more positive opportunities for them to feel secure and safe.

What are some signs my baby is ready to eat?

There are several signs that babies show they are ready to eat at the breast or bottle. Intravenous (IV) lines (fluid given directly into a vein) and tube feeding help support many NICU babies. IV's and tube feeding help them while they grow and show they are ready to eat.

Signs that they are ready to start eating include:

- Waking up at regular times to feed
- Sucking on a pacifier, sucking on hands, showing interest, turning head to find food
- Showing calm breathing, heart rate, and oxygen levels when resting
- Positive communication with you/no signs of stress when offering pacifier and holding at feed times

Our nurses and feeding therapy team will start slowly feeding your baby with small amounts. In order for your child to be safe when they eat, they need to learn how to suck, swallow, and breathe at the same time.

What is aspiration?

Safety first! As babies learn to coordinate suck, swallow, and breathe at the same time, they may be at risk for aspiration (swallowing liquid towards the lungs). Sometimes aspiration can be silent. This means your baby may not cough. It is important to pay attention to all the little changes in your babies face and body movements when they eat. It takes strength to drink and eat well. If your baby falls asleep or breathes faster while eating, they may need some time to work on it.

What can I do to help protect my baby?

You can help support your baby's needs by paying close attention to how they communicate. This will help create positive opportunities for them to learn how to eat, play and socialize.

Feeding is a workout for your baby. Look for signs of when feeding is too much work, such as working hard to breathe, making breath sounds you can hear, or gulping. The tube to their tummy is right next to the tube to their airway, so this could be an early sign of trouble coordinating their swallow.

Rehabilitation Services

4650 Sunset Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90027 | CHLA.org

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Finding a safe way to eat is an important step in planning to go home from the hospital. Some babies might need tube feeding support when they go home so they can grow at their own pace.

Successful feeding is not about how much your baby eats each time. It is more about building positive experiences with food. Our hope is to create a lifelong positive relationship with food.

Questions? Please ask your healthcare team for more information.