Breastfeeding your premature baby

Your breast milk is important to your baby at any age. Giving your premature baby your breast milk benefits their health as well as yours.

Breast milk:

* helps protect your baby from infections, particularly of their gut – premature babies are more likely to get infections
* contains hormones, nutrients and growth factors that help your baby to grow and develop
* is easier for your baby to digest than formula milk, because it's human milk specially designed by your body for your baby

See other benefits of breastfeeding.

If your baby is very small or sick, they may not be able to breastfeed from your breast at first. But you can start regularly collecting your breast milk (called expressing) as soon as possible after your baby is born.

This will help get your milk supply going and the milk you express can be frozen so you can give it to your baby later. Then you can start breastfeeding from the breast once you and your baby are ready.

Even if you were not planning to breastfeed, you could express your breast milk for a while to help boost your baby's immune system in the early weeks after birth.

Spending lots of time close together with your baby can help boost your breast milk supply and establish breastfeeding.

Skin-to-skin contact with your premature baby

If your baby is well enough, you'll usually be encouraged to spend time holding them against your skin as soon as possible. This is sometimes called kangaroo care.

Your baby will usually be dressed just in a nappy, hat and socks and then placed inside your top, under a blanket, or in a soft sling so they can be held securely against your skin. If it's cold outside, you can also put them in a sleeveless vest with an open neck.

This skin-to-skin contact helps you feel close to your baby. Your partner can enjoy this kind of contact as well.

For your premature baby, skin-to-skin contact:

* reduces stress and pain
* promotes healthy weight gain
* helps to establish breastfeeding
* helps them sleep better
* helps to regulate and support their heart rate and breathing

For mums, skin-to-skin contact:

* helps reduce your chance of developing postnatal depression
* increases your confidence as a new parent
* can help make breastfeeding easier and increase the amount of milk you make

For dads and partners, holding your baby skin to skin:

* helps you bond with your baby – babies can hear both parents' voices in the womb and will be calmed by the sound of your voice as well as their mum's
* helps you feel more confident as a parent

Expressing milk if your baby is premature

It's recommended you express often, ideally at least 8 times a day to begin with – including at least once at night – to keep your milk supply up.

In the early days, it's often easier to express your milk by hand. Your midwife or a breastfeeding supporter can show you how.

You'll probably only express a few drops to begin with but, if you hand express often, this will increase. Even if you are only expressing a small amount it will still help your baby.

In the early days you can collect your breast milk in a small, sterile cup and store it in a syringe.

Once you are producing more milk, you could try using a breast pump. If your baby is in a neonatal unit, the hospital will usually be able to lend you an electric breast pump for expressing your milk. If they cannot lend you one, you can hire one.

The staff, your midwife or a breastfeeding supporter can give you advice about how to increase your milk supply. They can also show you how to encourage your milk to flow and how to use a breast pump.

Always ask for help early if you have any worries or questions.

Tube feeding your baby

Babies do not normally learn to co-ordinate the sucking, swallowing and breathing needed for feeding until about 34 to 36 weeks of pregnancy.

If your baby is born before this time, they may need to have breast milk through a feeding tube to begin with. This goes through their nose or mouth into their stomach. The staff in the neonatal unit can show you how to feed your baby this way.

Babies who are very premature or sick may need to be fed through an intravenous (IV) line to begin with. A fluid containing nutrients is fed straight into your baby's vein.

Moving on to breastfeeding your premature baby

While holding your baby, you may notice them try to move towards your breast. Gradually, as they develop and get stronger, they will be able to breastfeed directly.

The first time you try it, the hospital staff may ask you to express first, then put your baby to your breast. This is so your baby is not overwhelmed when your milk lets down.

At first, your baby may only lick the breast, then next time take a few sucks until they gradually become happy and confident feeders.

You can combine tube feeding with breastfeeding until your baby is getting everything they need from the breast only.

Using a lactation aid (supplementer)

You could also consider using a lactation aid. This is a way of supplementing your baby's breastfeeds with either expressed breast milk or formula.

A tiny tube is taped next to your nipple so your baby can get milk through the tube as well as from your breast while attached to your breast. This helps to support your baby as they get used to attaching to the breast.