



# Breastfeeding

What To Expect In The First Few Weeks!



# The First Few Weeks

Whether your birth needed lots of intervention or you delivered naturally, the first few weeks can be hard. Trying to balance the exhaustion, worry and hormonal swings with the excitement that comes with new parenthood can be challenging!

This booklet is written to help you understand the first weeks of breastfeeding and to reassure you about what to expect!

## How Your Milk Supply Works

Towards the end of pregnancy and for the first few days you will produce what is called your “first milk”: colostrum. This is thick and sticky and is usually produced in very small amounts. However, your baby is very little, so it has all the calories they will need. Colostrum is packed full of antibodies and is often referred to as baby’s first immunisation, so these first feeds might be small, but they are powerful!

Somewhere between day 3 and day 5, your colostrum changes to your “mature milk”. You may find your breasts feel firm and a little bit sore. This engorgement can sometimes cause a few teething troubles if the breast is overly full. You might feel your baby, who previously latched on fine, now struggles to attach to your fuller breasts. Experimenting with a new position or softening your breasts slightly with a little hand expression can be helpful. These issues usually do pass quickly, but if it feels like a problem, seek out some support.

Your milk production builds over the first weeks in response to stimulation at the breasts. That’s achieved by either a baby feeding or expressing if they cannot feed directly. Newborn babies feed frequently and you should expect or encourage your new baby to feed at least 8-12 times in 24 hours. Some babies will even feed more than this! It helps to establish breastfeeding and your milk supply if you breastfeed responsively- that means watching for your baby’s early cues to breastfeed and also listening to your body/instincts about when you **need** to breastfeed. Your newborn may be sleepy and not cue much in these early days, so remember you can **offer** feeds, as well as waiting for signs.

Feeding your baby when they are calm is much easier than trying to breastfeed a crying baby and you can practice as much as you like! You may be wondering about getting your baby into a feeding routine, but babies have no idea what a routine is. Newborns need frequent, small feeds to fill their tiny stomachs and settle their hunger; like other little mammals, they too are programmed to be cuddled close and feed often. You cannot spoil a baby with snuggles and breastfeeds- in fact, you are actually growing their brain with every touch! How amazing is that?

## How can I tell my baby is getting enough?

In a world where we like to measure and quantify everything, sometimes it can feel difficult to trust breastfeeding! However, there are some easy ways to know your baby is getting enough milk. The first one is nappy output- what goes in, must come out! So if you are breastfeeding and you are seeing the expected pees and poop you can be reassured they are getting the milk they need.

It's worth knowing that most babies lose weight initially (usually somewhere in the region of up to 7-10%) and often don't regain their birth weight until about 2 or 3 weeks old. After that, if your baby is gaining between 20-30g a day, this is another indicator that all is well in terms of milk intake.

## Top Ups- Yes or No?

In these early days it is easy to feel overwhelmed and you could be tempted to offer some formula milk. It's worth thinking about this carefully. If baby is having formula instead of breastfeeding, it sends the message to your body that milk is no longer needed at that time. Formula is also slower to digest than breast milk, so means baby spends less time suckling at the breast, meaning less stimulation to your milk supply. With frequent top ups, milk supply drops and baby often becomes fussy. At this point, often more formula is offered. This can become a vicious cycle leading to the end of breastfeeding- often called the "top up trap".



Sometimes, formula top ups can be medically indicated by your midwife, health visitor or GP. If this is the case, it's a good idea to have both a short term plan for the supplementing while protecting your milk supply and a longer term plan involving breastfeeding support. It is important to figure out why supplementation is needed. Quite often, the issue is not with the milk supply of the parent but other issues, including ineffective attachment to the breast and problems that can be simply resolved with good support.

## Should my nipples be sore?

Some short-term soreness, especially as baby first latches on and your milk 'lets-down' is common in the first couple of weeks and tends to peak during the first week. This can be normal, as long as the pain is only for a short time at the start of the feed and gets better once baby gets going.

However, if you are finding feeding painful for most of the feed, you notice your nipple shape is squashed after a feed or you are developing cracks to the nipple, this is a sign your baby's latch is a little shallow. If this is the case, ask for some extra support from a midwife, health visitor or a peer supporter. Often, with a bit of tweaking, feeding is more comfortable!

## Fussy evenings and cluster feeding

At some point over the first couple of weeks, your baby might "wake up" from a sleepy and calm newborn stage and become fussy, often in the early evenings. This is a really common experience however babies are fed, but it can be easy to worry you aren't producing enough milk.



Remember: if your baby is producing a good amount of dirty and wet nappies and putting on weight well, this is unlikely to be down to your milk supply. Often, babies will start bunching up lots of feeds together in a period of a few hours; this is often referred to as cluster feeding. Trust your baby; they know what they are doing! As they switch back and forth with these shortly spaced feeds, they are getting lots of high fat milk, which is great for their brain development.

The upside is afterwards they often sleep for a few hours, so grab some rest too while you can. Cluster feeding really helps to establish supply, so it can help to just “go with it”. Sit back with some good TV or a book, grab some snacks and a drink and settle in for some topless cuddle time with your baby. This stage passes after a few weeks- not long in the grand scheme of things! After it does, breastfeeding is far easier than any other way of feeding.

## Adjusting to parenthood

Sleep whenever you can, but rest when you can't. Rest might involve just sitting down and doing something that relaxes you while skin to skin with baby. Make sure you accept and ask for help from family and friends where available. If you are the partner, don't underestimate your own importance. Research shows the support you can offer can be incredibly helpful to establish breastfeeding. You can be a cheerleader for your partner, offer encouragement, help them seek support if needed, remind them why you both wanted to breastfeed in the first place. You can also help out practically: feed your partner while they feed your baby and snuggle baby in a wrap or skin to skin when they have finished feeding so your partner can rest. This is a great way for you to bond with your new baby too!

## If you are finding things tough

Remember, you are not in this alone and there is lots of support out there to help you. There are a number of breastfeeding support groups across Charnwood and we also have a closed Facebook group, where you can go and get practical support and information, or just some well needed confidence boosting. Talking to other breastfeeders helps tremendously in the early weeks and there are health professionals and local peer supporters on hand too. You can also give us a call on our helpline or email us.

It can help to remind yourself that there are lots of things in life that take determination and practice before they are mastered, but we persevere because the end result is worth it; think of learning to drive a car or mastering another language. Getting breastfeeding established is an important goal of the first few weeks. You and your baby learn to breastfeed together and remember, it is new to you both. Slowly, the whole process will become easier. Little tummies grow and babies change quickly; breastfeeding doesn't feel overwhelming forever. In the overall view of your life, and your baby's life, this intense time will be a brief and fleeting part and you won't regret the effort put in, in the long run. You are amazing!

*One step at a time, is how we get there.*