Breastfeeding Basics

1 Why isn’t breastfeeding easy?

Exclusive breastfeeding is the healthiest way to feed your baby and is recommended by all public health experts. Breastfeeding also protects babies from many types of illness and infections. But what those experts don’t tell you is that it doesn’t come naturally to every mother and baby. In fact, it’s normal to take 3–5 days for your milk to fully arrive, several weeks to get the latch just right, and even months to feel completely skilled and comfortable. Babies are born knowing how to find the nipple and suckle. Most mothers naturally make milk, but they have to learn how to deliver it to baby. Here are some tips from breastfeeding experts—pros and moms.

Try to relax

New mothers feel a lot of pressure to breastfeed nowadays because of the known health benefits to babies and mothers. What’s important for all new mothers to remember is: Nobody does something new perfectly the first time. Breastfeeding can take a while to learn and get the hang of, so take a deep breath and remember that it’s a learning process. Be kind to yourself, and don’t be afraid to ask your HealthySteps Specialist for help if you need it.

Help with latching on

Use your hand to squeeze your breast like a pancake to express a little milk onto your nipples. The smell encourages baby to latch. A pancake “C” or “U” hold (as pictured) can make it easier for a round breast to fit into a tiny mouth. (Ask your HealthySteps Specialist to show you how to do this, if you aren’t sure.) The goal is to have your baby’s mouth as wide open as possible before it clamps down on the breast. Once latched, your baby’s chin should be buried deep in your breast with little to no areola showing.

If baby is frantic or crying inconsolably, try calming him first by putting him naked between your breasts. Skin-to-skin touch is a natural baby calmer and even works on dad’s chest! If baby won’t stop crying (or you start crying), hand him to someone else while you take a break. Avoid swaddling your baby during feeds when first learning to latch. It makes newborns sleepy and they may even sleep through feeds.

2 What about engorgement?

At any time when you breastfeed, your breasts may fill quickly and become hard. This usually goes away after the next feeding. If your baby has trouble latching, hand express just enough milk to feel comfortable (breast pumps can sometimes be counterproductive). Having even slightly softer breasts makes it easier for baby to nurse. A warm cloth on the breast may also soften the breasts before...
feeding. Engorgement that doesn’t get better with feeding or is accompanied by severe pain needs medical attention.

3 **Do you have a sleepy baby?**

Many newborns fall asleep while feeding—it’s their only exercise. Others have a difficult time waking up to feed. Try these to wake your baby:

- Burp him before and after each breast
- Undress her down to a diaper or change her diaper just before feeding
- Tickle his chin or cheeks while nursing to remind him to suckle
- Gently flex and extend her forearms fully (like she’s doing bicep curls) as she feeds

4 **What to do about leaking milk?**

This is a common, annoying problem. Place a nursing pad (or two) inside your bra cup and change them as soon as they are wet to prevent infection. Tops made with patterned fabric hide leaks more easily. Leaking usually lessens with time, and with larger, hungrier babies.

**Managing pain**

In the first few days, breastfeeding may help your uterus go back to normal size, which can cause cramps. In the first few weeks, nipples can get sore for a variety of reasons. The most common reason is improper positioning. Try making sure baby’s mouth is more wide open before latching, or use different holds: the football hold (baby’s head at your breast and feet under the same-side arm), the cross-cradle hold (baby’s feet tucked behind the opposite side that is being nursed), or the side-lying hold (both of you lying down on your sides with baby’s head at your breast). Take time to experiment. Every baby and mom are different; the position that worked for your sister or friend might not work for you.

If pain does not improve with improved latching, contact your doctor or lactation professional.

**Staying healthy**

It’s important to know that breastfeeding burns additional calories, which means nursing mothers need to eat more. It’s also necessary to drink plenty of fluids to stay hydrated. Also, remember that alcohol and many medications are passed through breastmilk to baby. If you are going to have a drink, do so just after breastfeeding or pumping as that will give your body maximum time to metabolize the alcohol before the next feeding. Alcohol can reduce milk supply and cause changes in its taste which some babies may not like. Excessive or prolonged alcohol use is unhealthy for baby, and is not recommended.

To find lactation professionals in your area download the free latchME app or visit their free map.

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Latch diagrams used with permission from La Leche League International.