

How to Breastfeed

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Breastfeeding may be perfectly natural, but it's still a skill that you and your baby will learn together. You might have a smooth start or your first few feedings might be a little stressful for both of you. Fortunately, you can learn; in fact, it will become like second nature with just a little time and a little practice.

Rule #1 When Learning to Breastfeed: Be Patient and Be Kind

While you're learning to nurse your baby, remember to be patient and kind to yourself and baby. You're both newbies at this. You may not be, but each baby has to learn how to nurse. He may have had practice in utero sucking fingers, toes, or lips, but those aren't the real deal.

Your hospital or birthing center should have staff members who are able to help you learn to nurse your newborn. It would be a good idea to ask before your delivery so that the staff knows that you'll need help.

Step 1: Positioning

The most important thing you and baby need to learn is what goes where when it's nursing time. Sure, the nipple goes in baby's mouth, but how? How should his head be positioned? Where are her arms, legs, and body while she's nursing? How can you sit so that your back won't ache?

The classic cradle hold looks like it should be the easiest, but while you're just learning, start out with the belly-to-belly hold. When you hold your baby to nurse, her entire body needs to be facing yours, not just her head. You want her body to be wrapped around the front of yours, with her mouth positioned right in front of your breast. This is easy to practice when baby is sleepy or asleep. Her bottom arm will either be pressed against your belly or stretched forward around the side of your waist.

Pick up your baby and hold her in a cradle hold. Then, gently roll her over further so that she's completely on her side. Place her head in the crook of your arm and make sure her belly and yours are touching.

Sit down and lean back into the chair, couch, or bed. You don't want to lean forward or your back will ache in a matter of minutes. You want to be comfortable and relaxed when you nurse. Both will come quickly as your confidence in your nursing abilities increases.

Step 2: Latch On

Helping baby latch on - and latch on in the correct way - is your next step. Hold your baby close to your body and guide his mouth to your breast. To help him open his mouth, circle his mouth with the tip of your finger or touch your nipple to his mouth. You want him to open his mouth wide – wide enough for you to see his tongue.

Position your hand (the one that is not supporting your baby) in a C around the front of your breast, with the thumb an inch or so above the top of the areola and the other fingers about an inch or so below the areola. Your goal is to get as much of your areola into the baby's mouth as possible. Doing so will allow your baby to express milk from your breast efficiently and – most importantly - without pain for you. If you want to avoid painful nipples, get more than just your nipple in there.

So, with baby's mouth open wide enough for you to see her tongue and your breast supported and positioned with your hand, quickly bring baby onto your breast, getting from 1 to 1-1/2 inches from the tip of your nipple into her mouth. Bringing baby to you vs. leaning forward will prevent your back from aching.

Hold baby close to you, so that his mouth and chin, and maybe nose, are touching your breast. His lips should be flanged (flared) out around your breast. If his lips are just pursed, as if for a kiss, then you need to take him off the breast and try again. Achieving good latch on is important because it will affect how well baby can express your milk. Good latch on is also the number one way to help prevent sore nipples.

Even I suffered the consequences of poor latch on - and this was while nursing my second baby and while being a nursing mother counselor. Whether it was because of sleep deprivation or inattention, the result was that my nipples were feeling something way beyond “discomfort.” I broke into a cold sweat every time feeding time rolled around.

The baby didn't have any problems getting the milk; he was what you'd call an enthusiastic nurser, which was terrifying while my nipples were so sore. But I'm stubborn and kept working at it until we'd achieved good latch on every time. So, take it from me: take the time to get a good latch on (1 to 1-1/2 inch of breast in baby's mouth and baby's lips flanged outward).

Once your baby is latched on correctly and nursing, you'll be able to watch his jaw moving rhythmically, feel his tongue pressing on your areola, see him swallowing, and hear him breathing. If you're at all concerned that your breast might be interfering with his breathing, you can always gently push in on your breast with a fingertip or two.

At the end of the feeding, you'll need to break the suction between your baby and your breast. Forgetting this step will be pretty memorable (for you, anyway), so learn to do it now, so that you won't have that memory to forget. Simply slip a fingertip into your baby's mouth so that she'll pull on your finger, not your nipple, when she's coming off.

Learning to breastfeed is a process, just like learning any other skill. After just a few feedings, you and your baby will become a confident, relaxed nursing couple.

About the Author

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