

# Breastfeeding FAQ's: How Much and How Often?

## How often should I breastfeed?

Your newborn should be nursing eight to 12 times per day for about the first month. If you feel like you're feeding your little one more often than someone you know whose baby is formula fed, you may be. Why? Because breast milk digests easier than formula, which means it moves through your baby's digestive system faster and, therefore, makes your baby hungry more often.

Frequent feedings also will help stimulate your milk production during the first few weeks. By one to two months of age, a breastfed baby will probably nurse seven to nine times a day.

Before your milk supply is established, breastfeeding should be "on demand" (when your baby is hungry), which is generally every one and a half to three hours. As newborns get older, they'll need to nurse less frequently, and may develop a more reliable schedule. Some may feed every hour and a half, whereas others may go two or three hours between feedings. Newborns should not go more than about four hours without feeding, even overnight.

Are feeding intervals counted from the time my baby starts or stops nursing?

You count the length between feedings from the time

when your baby *begins* to nurse — rather than when he or she *ends* — to when your little one starts nursing again. In other words, when your doctor asks how often your baby is feeding, you can say "about every two hours" if your first feeding started at 6 a.m. and the next feeding was at around 8 a.m., then 10 a.m., and so on.

This means that, especially at first, you may feel like you're nursing around the clock, which is completely normal. Soon enough, you'll both be on a more routine, predictable schedule.

## How can I tell when my baby's ready to eat?

It's generally recommended that you feed your baby whenever he or she seems hungry. But despite what some new parents might think, crying is a *late* sign of hunger. You should try to feed *before* your baby gets so hungry that he or she gets really upset and becomes difficult to calm down.

It's also important, however, to realize that every time your baby cries it is *not* necessarily because of hunger. Sometimes babies just need to be cuddled or changed. Or they could be overstimulated, bored, or too hot or too cold.

One way to tell if your baby is, indeed, ready to eat is to

check the clock. If your baby is crying only an hour after a good feeding, there may be something else causing the distress. Signs that babies *are* hungry include:

- **moving their heads from side to side**
- **opening their mouths**
- **sticking out their tongues**
- **placing their hands and fists to their mouths**
- **puckering their lips as if to suck**
- **nuzzling against their mothers' breasts**
- **showing the rooting reflex (when a baby moves its mouth in the direction of something that's stroking or touching its cheek)**

Watch for signs that your baby is full (slow, uninterested sucking; turning away from the breast or bottle) and stop the feeding once these signs appear.

## **How long does it take to nurse?**

That depends on both you and your baby and many other factors, such as whether:

- **your milk supply has come in completely**
- **your let-down (or milk ejection reflex) is immediate or takes a few minutes into the feeding to start**
- **your milk flow is slow or fast**
- **you're positioning your baby correctly on your breast**
- **your baby tends to get right down to business or dawdles a bit**

- **your baby is sleepy or easily distracted (which can be the case in older babies, especially)**

How long babies nurse also depends on their age. As babies get older, they become more efficient, so they may take anywhere from five to ten minutes on each side, as compared to when they were newborns and fed for up to 20 minutes on each side.

Make sure your baby is latched on correctly from the beginning to ensure the most productive feeding possible. It's important that your baby nurses with a wide-open mouth and takes as much as possible of your areola in his or her mouth (not just the tip of the nipple).

But be sure to call your doctor if you're concerned about the length of your baby's feedings — whether they seem too short *or* too long.

## **How often should I alternate breasts?**

To keep up your milk supply in both breasts — and prevent painful engorgement in one — it's important to alternate breasts and try to give each one the same amount of nursing time throughout the day. Again, that amount of time differs for every baby and every woman — some babies may be satisfied after five minutes on each breast, others may need ten or fifteen minutes on each side.

Some experts recommend switching breasts in the middle of each feeding and alternating which breast you offer first for each feeding. Can't remember on which breast your baby last nursed? Some women find it helpful to attach a subtle reminder — a safety pin or small ribbon — to their bra straps indicating which breast they last nursed on so they'll know to start with that breast at the next feeding. Or, keep a notebook handy to keep track of how long the baby feeds.

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However, some lactation specialists are now recommending just nursing on one breast per feeding and switching breasts from one feed to the next. This allows the baby to get more of the hind-milk, which is fattier. (At the beginning of a feeding, the milk has less fat than at the end of the feeding.)

But your baby may seem to prefer both breasts with each feeding and may be doing well. Or, your little one may like to nurse on just one breast with each feeding. Whichever way you choose, it's important for you to do whatever works and is the most comfortable for you and your baby.

### **How often should I burp my baby during feedings?**

Let your baby breastfeed at one breast then switch to the other side. Try burping your baby when switching breasts and at the end of the feed. Often, the movement alone can be enough to cause a baby to burp.

However, because some lactation consultants are now recommending just nursing on one breast during each feeding (see the question above), if your baby is doing well early on, let your little one continue to nurse as long as is comfortable on one breast. Then try burping your baby during a natural break or at the end of the feeding.

As your milk comes in and your baby has established good latch-on, then you can try burping as frequently as you think helps your baby. Some infants need more or less burping and it can vary from feeding to feeding depending on what the mother has been eating. If your baby spits up a lot, you may need to try burping more frequently.

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*While it's normal for infants "spit up" a small amount after eating or during burping, a baby should not vomit after feeding. This can be due to overfeeding, but vomiting after every feeding may be a sign of an allergy, digestive problem, or other problem that needs medical attention.*

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If you have concerns that your baby is spitting up too much, call your doctor.

### **How can I tell if my baby's eating enough?**

New mothers, especially breastfeeding moms, are often concerned that their infants may not be getting enough to eat. You can be assured that your baby *is* getting enough to eat if he or she:

- seems satisfied and content after eating
- produces about four to six wet diapers a day
- has regular bowel movements
- sleeps well
- is alert when awake
- is gaining weight

Your baby *may not* be getting enough to eat if he or she:

- does not appear to be satisfied after feeding
- seems hungry often
- isn't making several wet and stool diapers a day
- is fussy or cries a lot
- isn't gaining weight

If you're concerned that your baby isn't getting enough to eat, call your doctor. Breastfed infants should also be seen by their pediatrician 48 to 72 hours after a mother and newborn leave the hospital. During this visit, the baby will be weighed and examined, and the mother's breastfeeding technique can be evaluated. It's also an opportunity for nursing mothers to ask questions. If a breastfed baby is doing well, the doctor will probably schedule another visit for around two weeks of age.

Continue on with these postnatal checkups so that you can be sure that your baby is gaining weight and getting enough nutrients.

For your own piece of mind, it can help to keep a notebook to write down each time the baby feeds, how long the baby fed on each breast, and each time the baby stools (poops) or makes a wet diaper. If you're concerned or notice any signs that your infant isn't getting enough nutrients, call your baby's doctor.

## What should my newborn's diapers look like?

Your baby's diapers are excellent indicators of whether your breastfed baby is getting what he or she needs. Because colostrum (the first milk your newborn gets) is concentrated, your baby may have only one or two wet diapers in the first 24 hours.

Newborns' stools (or poop) are thick and tarry at first and become more greenish-yellow as your milk comes in, which is usually about three or four days after birth. The more your baby nurses, the more dirty (or "soiled") diapers he or she will have; but it may be just one a day in the first days after birth.

After three to four days, here are some signs you should look for:

- **Six or more wet diapers per day, with clear or very pale urine. Fewer diapers or darker urine may mean your baby's not getting enough to drink. If you see orange crystals in a wet diaper, contact your baby's doctor — these can be a sign of inadequate fluid intake or dehydration.**
- **Four or more yellow, seedy bowel movements per day, usually one after each feeding. After about a month, though, breastfed babies usually have fewer bowel movements and many may go a few days without pooping.**

## My baby wants to nurse for comfort. Is this OK?

If your baby seems to be getting enough milk, but continues to suck for an hour or more, he or she might be nursing for comfort rather than for nourishment. So, how do you know? Once your baby has fed vigorously, he or she may stay on your breast but show these signs of **non-nutritive sucking** (or **pacifying**):

- **seems satisfied**
- **stops sucking and swallowing**
- **plays with your nipple**

Early on, it's OK to let your baby nurse for comfort, but it can become problematic as your little one gets older because he or she may need to nurse to take a nap or go to bed at night. So, at some point in the second or third month, you should probably wean your baby off of sucking for comfort and make breastfeeding sessions about nourishment not pacifying.

Instead of nursing, you may want to offer your baby his or her thumb or hand to suck on. You also could consider giving your little one a pacifier if your child doesn't seem to be hungry. Because of a lower risk of sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS), the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) now recommends letting babies go to sleep with a pacifier. However, you should only do this after breastfeeding is well established (usually after one month).

If possible, you should also hold off on introducing a bottle until breastfeeding is well-established. Some babies have "nipple confusion," though the likelihood of this happening is much less after four to six weeks.

## **My baby is hungrier than usual. Is this normal?**

As babies gain weight, they should begin to eat more at each feeding and go longer between feedings. Still, there may be times when your little one seems hungrier than usual.

Your baby may be going through a period of rapid growth (called a **growth spurt**). These can happen at any time, but in the early months growth spurts often occur at around:

- 7 to 14 days old
- 2 months
- 4 months
- 6 months

During these times and whenever your baby seems especially hungry, follow his or her hunger cues. You may need to temporarily increase the frequency of feedings.