

Breastfeeding

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Breastfeeding is the normal, natural way for mothers to feed their babies and naturally spaces pregnancies. Bottlefeeding is suboptimal for maternal and infant health and has a serious effect on fertility, allowing a woman who has just given birth to conceive again quickly. Very few mother-baby couplets are physically unable to breastfeed; the most common problem is one of lack of understanding of positioning.

Beginning to breastfeed

The baby should be placed on the mother's stomach or chest immediately after birth. A newborn can then find its own way to the breast and begin to feed. After this first breastfeed, mothers can position their babies in various ways. The most common position is known as the Cradle Hold. The baby's head lies on the mother's forearm (not in the crook of her elbow) and the baby is brought to the breast. The baby's stomach should face the mother's stomach, and the baby's head and spine should be in a straight line, i.e. the baby is not turning its head. The mother's other hand should be used to cup around her breast in a 'C' shape to help position the nipple in the baby's open mouth.

Mothers who have had a Caesarean section will need to breastfeed lying down. A towel or blanket can protect the incision on the mother's abdomen.

Premature and ill babies in general benefit from being breastfed or fed expressed breastmilk. The hospital should be able to assist.

Midwives should be able to assist in breastfeeding. Attending a voluntary group such as La Leche League during pregnancy and during breastfeeding can help to avoid difficulties. Breastfeeding is completely natural, but that is not the same thing as automatic. It is a manual skill which must be learned, ideally by observation. In a breastfeeding culture, girls and young women have opportunities to observe other women feeding their babies and thus experience fewer difficulties. In a bottlefeeding culture pregnant and new mothers often need practical help and support in order to avoid and overcome difficulties with breastfeeding.

It is important to recognise, also, that breastfeeding should not hurt. The baby's latch should feel like pressure, not pain. Sore and cracked nipples can be remedied with good positioning. New mothers should not persevere in pain, but should seek help immediately.

The baby should be fed on demand. A newborn will normally feed about ten to twelve times in twenty-four hours. The principle of feeding on demand has been demonstrated to lead to more successful breastfeeding for a longer period.

Continuing with breastfeeding

According to the World Health Organisation, babies should be exclusively breastfed for six months, without the introduction of supplementary bottles or foods, and should then be breastfed up to the age of two and beyond once solids are introduced around six months. From a natural family planning perspective, breastfeeding is an important spacer of pregnancies. Mothers should breastfeed for as long as they and the baby are happy to continue.

Breastmilk is the ideal food for a baby up to the age of six months, and the baby does not need anything else. Introducing solids at an earlier age replaces the ideal (a breastfeed) with something that is less ideal for the baby.

Many mothers who need to be absent from their babies express milk to give to the baby. An NFP teacher can help a mother in this situation to determine the effect on her fertility.

Link: www.lalecheleagueireland.com This website has information on the benefits of breastfeeding and all kinds of breastfeeding matters.