



ILCA's INSIDE TRACK

a resource for breastfeeding mothers

A Publication of the International
Lactation Consultant Association 

Breastfeeding Your Premature or Sick Baby: Getting Started

By Kathleen S. Kuhn, RN, BSN, IBCLC, and Megan J. Kuhn, RN, BSN

If your baby is born early or is sick, he may start life in the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) of your hospital. If your baby is in a NICU, you may wonder if you will be able to breastfeed. Most babies are able to breastfeed, even during and after a stay in a hospital NICU.

Why should you breastfeed your baby?

- Breast milk helps build your baby's digestive and immune systems.
- Only YOU can breastfeed. Only YOU can provide your milk for your baby.
- Your milk is made to help protect your baby from germs.
- Breast milk is like medicine for your baby. It will help your baby to be healthy.

Where can you get help?

- Your family and friends who have breastfed can help you. But do not forget that you may need to do things in a different way since your baby was born early or sick.
- The nurses and other staff in the hospital will help you. Be sure your nurses know that you plan to breastfeed. Let them know you want to give your milk to your baby as well.
- Some hospitals have International Board Certified Lactation Consultants (IBCLCs or lactation consultants) who help mothers of premature or sick babies.
- Ask the nurses to help you find a nursing mothers support group such as La Leche League.
- You may receive a visit from a community or visiting nurse.

How to make enough breast milk

- You will need to remove the milk from your breasts soon after your baby is born. This helps your body make enough milk. You can use a breast pump, or you can use your hands, which is called hand expressing. Some mothers do both, which may help you to make more milk.
- Many hospitals will have breast pumps for you to use. The nurses can help you get a pump to use at home.
- Begin to express your milk by the time your baby is 6 hours old. You need to do this even if your baby is not ready to take milk yet.
- Have a nurse teach you how to hand express your milk. You can also do this before you use a pump. Use a teaspoon or tiny cup to catch the milk. The nurse can show you how to save this early milk for your baby. Once you are pumping more milk, you can hand express after you finish pumping to help get every drop you can!
- Express or pump your milk 8 to 10 times each 24 hours for at least the first 2 to 4 weeks. You may be able to pump fewer times once you are making 25 to 30 oz (740-887 mL) of milk each day. Your lactation consultant can help you to know when you can do this. You will want to keep pumping at least 25 oz (740 mL) of milk each day until your baby is breastfeeding well. You will want to pump more than 25 oz (740 mL) if you have more than one baby. For example, pump twice as much milk, 50 oz (1480 ml), if you have twins.
- The more often you express or pump your milk, the more milk you will make.



- Many mothers find it best to express or pump every 2 hours during the day and evening. Then they wake once at night to pump milk. Try not to go longer than 5 hours without expressing or pumping your milk.
- Some mothers will pump milk every 3 hours for part of the day. Then they express more often later in the day when they have more time. They aim for 10 times each day.
- The nurses will teach you how to store your milk and may provide special containers and labels.
- Talk to your baby's nurse about holding your baby skin-to-skin (called Kangaroo Mother Care). This helps keep your milk supply up. It helps your body know how to make milk with antibodies to fight germs your baby is exposed to. Your baby will feel safe and grow well when he or she is snuggled against your chest. Try to express milk right after you have held your baby if you can.

What is kangaroo mother care?

The baby wears a diaper and sometimes a hat. The mother removes her bra. The baby is placed skin-to-skin, with his or her bare chest snuggled against the mother's bare chest. A blanket is placed over the baby's back to cover the baby and mother.

Why do kangaroo mother care?

- **The baby breathes better.**
- **The baby's heart rate is more regular.**
- **The baby stays warmer.**
- **The baby's brain develops better.**
- **The mother makes more milk.**
- **The mother and baby get to know each other.**
- **It feels good for both baby and mother!**