

Breastfeeding 101 (the Baby Wishes way...)

If you are an expectant mum in today's world, chances are you've heard about the benefits of breastfeeding, how breast is best and how you should exclusively breastfeed your baby for the first six months, at least.

We are proud to say that we tried – and succeeded at breastfeeding our babies for at least 6 months, (though not exclusively the entire time) and our kids are happy and healthy, so we feel we qualify to give some advice on this! Coupled with the fact that most of the advice we received were from fellow mummies.

1) Preparing for Breastfeeding

Many mummies ask if there is anything they can do to prepare themselves for breastfeeding. Honestly – our advice, is SLEEP! You won't have much of it once baby arrives and if you are keen on successful breastfeeding.

We did vaguely see on some Chinese websites massages you can do to help with milk production and flow, but these will probably only help after baby arrives and not before. During your 40 weeks of pregnancy, your breast prepares for baby's arrival by producing colostrum. This is a thick, yellowish substance that is packed with nutrients essential for your baby's first few days after birth. You may see some dried whitish substance around your milk ducts and nipples – this is perfectly normal and there is no cause for concern. It does not affect your ability to breastfeed once baby arrives.

One of the best things you can do is to join a prenatal class to learn about pregnancy, breastfeeding, delivery and baby care. Most hospitals offer these and we participated in them ourselves. It's a good idea to go with your husband (if only for the reason that few mothers attend these alone!) so that you can participate in the pregnancy journey together and he can understand the bodily changes that occur during pregnancy, the stages of childbirth, breastfeeding essentials and basic baby care.

Spend time speaking with other friends who have successfully breastfed for at least 6 months to ask them for tips and advice. If you intend on breastfeeding after you return to work, it's worth investing in a good breast pump. We found that a dual electric breast pump worked best and was most effective, although opinions vary between our friends. There are many brands out there and the price varies too, so do your research and ask around. You can buy second hand breast pumps from Thomson Medical Centre. Do consider this if you are on a budget as this can save you 50% of the retail price at times. If you are concerned about hygiene, all you have to do is replace the parts that come into contact with your skin or milk and you're as good as new!

It is also a good idea to stock up on some nursing bras, nipple cream and breast pads so that you have them handy when you return home from the hospital. In fact you should pack these into your hospital bag as you'll probably need them right after delivery. Invest in a good nursing pillow as it will save your back and neck during the 2-3 hourly feeds which you will experience in the early weeks.

2) The First Few Days

If you are able to, breastfeed your baby in the delivery room. Baby is most alert after delivery and it's not unusual for a newborn to sleep a lot in the first few days, which may prove a challenge if you want to kick-start breastfeeding. It may take your baby a little while to latch on at first, but keep trying and you will succeed. This is where the prenatal classes help, as you can learn the proper techniques and use them right away in the delivery room. If baby doesn't latch on after many tries, don't fret. Just try again later. Let the nurses know that you will be breastfeeding your baby, otherwise they may feed your baby with milk from the bottle, which can cause nipple confusion. Your baby will then be too full to nurse and both baby and you need all the practice you can get on latching, sucking and feeding positions.

In the first few days, your body will not produce mature milk. Baby gets all the nutrition he or she needs from colostrum, which is already produced during pregnancy. It's normal for baby to lose a bit of weight upon discharge from the hospital and don't feel that it's your fault or that baby is not getting enough milk. Check with your doctor if you have any questions or concerns as they will be in the best position to advise you.

During your hospital stay, it's also a good idea to seek help from the experienced nurses and hospital lactation consultant. They are available to tend to your needs and a valuable resource as a lot of breastfeeding technique is hands-on and requires someone nearby to show you and advise you. There are several different breastfeeding positions and you can ask the nurses and lactation consultant to teach you these positions. Once you get home, unless you have an experienced neighbour, relative or friend, seeking such advice will require a visit to the hospital or paying a fee for the nurse or lactation consultant to visit you at your home.

3) It Hurts!

All the classes tell you that if your baby is latched on properly, it won't hurt. That's true to a certain extent, but it will still hurt even if your baby is latched on properly due to the sheer suction! This is especially so as baby feeds often during the early days. Don't panic and press on! Use the nipple cream to soothe your skin in between feeds and seek professional help or advice if you are concerned.

4) To Pump or not to Pump

Most of us in Singapore hire confinement nannies, which is a luxury that many don't get to enjoy in other countries. Unfortunately to find a confinement nanny that is fully supportive of breastfeeding and able to provide the proper advice is rare. This doesn't mean you shouldn't take their advice – weigh up what is said based on common sense, medical advice and tips you have learnt from prenatal class. When in doubt, contact your lactation consultant.

During the early days, you will have to wake up for night feeds, whether you like it or not. Prolactin, a hormone which stimulates milk supply is highest at night. Waking up for night feeds is tiring and your confinement nanny is likely to convince you to either express your milk at night or allow her to give your baby formula at night. The choice is really up to you as having adequate rest is the key to increasing milk supply. Personally, we woke up for night feeds but when we were too tired, we expressed our milk and allowed our nannies to feed our babies with expressed breastmilk. If you don't get up for night feeds at all, your milk supply will drop and you may eventually have to stop breastfeeding.

5) The Magic Word – Letdown

Remember this word well – especially if you intend to breastfeed after returning to work. To put it simply, the letdown reflex is a signal your brain gives to your milk ducts to release the milk held in the ducts. There are several things that trigger the let down reflex, including your baby's suckling, hearing your baby's cries, seeing a picture of your baby, etc. The important thing to remember is that the hormone oxytocin triggers the letdown reflex, and as we know, oxytocin is the happy hormone. What does this mean? If you're happy, the easier it is for you to breastfeed!

How does a letdown feel like? For most people, it feels like a tingling sensation in the breast. If you are expressing your milk, you'll see the milk being released in large volumes than before a letdown. If you are nursing your baby, you'll notice that your other breast will leak some milk during a letdown. Some mummies feel an instant thirst as well, so it's a good idea to have a drink or beverage close by whilst nursing.

6) How do I increase milk supply?

It's important to recognize that being relaxed, happy and well rested is the key to increasing your milk supply. Milk is produced based on demand – the more your baby feeds, the more milk your body will produce. If having a pedicure, getting your hair done, or just having a walk alone around the neighbourhood makes you happy, do it! A happy mummy is one that produces more milk than a miserable one!

For first time mums, mature milk is only produced around day 3 or 4. Your baby gets all the necessary nutrients from colostrum in the early days, so don't fret if you don't see milk flowing right away. Your milk supply will build and increase slowly as you continue to nurse frequently.

If you are concerned about your milk supply, you can take supplements like Fenugreek or Milk Thistle, available in stores like GNC. There are also other herbal teas for increasing milk supply that you will find in organic shops. Traditional recipes like green papaya and fish soup help, but these cannot replace a nutritious diet with lots of fluids. Make sure you eat well and rest well.

Personally, we have also found that taking a warm beverage before nursing or expressing helps with increasing the milk flow, as does massaging with a warm towel.

7) To Supplement or not to Supplement?

This is a question that invariably most breastfeeding mothers face. Firstly, recognize that there is no right or wrong answer – what matters is what's right for you and your baby. We've had friends who suffered from repeated bouts of mastitis or breast abscess that required surgery, who made the decision to stop breastfeeding after that. If you find breastfeeding is affecting your ability to care for your child and be a good mother, then by all means, stop or supplement.

It's also true that baby boys have a larger appetite than baby girls. Whilst we know many mothers who successfully nursed their sons exclusively till well past their birthdays, it doesn't mean you have to or that you can and it doesn't make you a bad mother if you decide to supplement with formula milk. Ultimately, the decision is a personal one. Speak to your husband and if necessary, a lactation consultant and do what is best for you and your baby. By all means, breastfeeding is not as easy or as natural as most of us imagine it to be and takes lots of persistence and perseverance. But remember that if you frustrated, tired, in pain or ill all the time, supplementing with formula milk or giving up breastfeeding altogether may be a better choice and make you a happier mother – and happy mothers make better mothers.

8) Breastfeeding problems

You may face problems throughout your breastfeeding journey. Briefly, these could include:

- Latching – it's not unusual for babies to take some time to learn how to latch and suckle properly. Keep trying, get help from a lactation consultant and don't give up! Your baby will get there eventually, unless there is an underlying problem like cleft lip, etc. Speak to the professionals if you are concerned. Avoid bottle feeding your baby in the first few days if possible, as this may cause nipple confusion.
- Engorgement – this happens if you stretch your feeds too far apart, but can also happen around day 4 or 5 when your mature milk comes in. It can be extremely painful and you will find that your breasts are very hard and painful to the touch. Continue to nurse your baby regularly and your body will adjust to the appropriate supply of milk. Personally, we found having a proper massage by a lactation consultant or malay jamu lady very helpful in relieving the engorgement.

- Blocked Ducts – this is very painful as well and may result in mastitis if the duct becomes infected. The best way to treat a blocked duct is to get your baby to continue nursing and the blocked duct should clear on its own. Baby's natural sucking is more effective than using a pump.
- Mastitis – if your blocked duct becomes red and infected and you start running a temperature, see a doctor immediately who will prescribe you with antibiotics to clear the infection. It is still safe for you to continue nursing your baby whilst on antibiotics, but if in doubt, speak to your doctor.

9) Returning to Work

For many Singaporean mummies, returning to work after maternity leave is commonplace. Many would like to continue nursing their child and this is certainly achievable with discipline and preparation. You need to invest in a good electric pump – we have heard differing views on whether a manual or electric pump works best. Personally, we invested in good dual electric pumps, which we carried to work and home on a daily basis. Investing in a special bra that allows you hands free pumping is a great idea too, as this means you can read, relax or catch up on work at the same time.

If your workplace does not have a nursing room that you can use, speak to your boss and ask for use of an empty function room or office. All you need is a room with a power point, table and chair and you're ready to go! You can keep your expressed milk in the office fridge in a properly labeled Ziploc bag.

10) Feeding on the Go

Many of us would agree that Singapore is a relatively conservative society and it is true that you get rude stares at some public places if you are nursing your child. However if you practice some discretion and make an effort to find a private corner to nurse your child, you can just about nurse anywhere.

Simple common-sense tips like carrying a nursing shawl or cloth to cover your breast whilst you nurse, wearing a nursing top, turning to face the corner or wall to avoid unnecessary stares make a big difference. Many experienced mums will tell you that they became so skilled at nursing in public that many friends would carry on a conversation with them not knowing that baby was actually feeding at the same time! With some preparation and practice, nursing in public is possible.

Useful Links:

- Breastfeeding Mothers Support Group: <http://www.breastfeeding.org.sg/>
- Moms in Mind: <http://www.momsinmind.com.sg/index.html>
- Baby Centre: <http://www.babycentre.co.uk/>
- Kellymom Breastfeeding & Parenting: <http://www.kellymom.com/>