



Breastfeeding a 34 to 38 Week Gestation Infant

Babies born between 34-38 weeks gestation usually don't have health problems or look premature, but they often have trouble learning to breastfeed. These babies may nurse well during their "alert time" right after birth, but feedings sometimes don't go so well after discharge from the hospital when the baby gets sleepy. It often takes premature babies several weeks to gain the endurance needed to breastfeed successfully. Until then, lactation support is often needed to help your baby get "over the hump."

How often do preterm babies need to eat? Preterm babies usually sleep for longer periods of time than full term infants and thus take feedings every 3-4 hours rather than the usual every 2-3 hours. Watch carefully for feeding cues and offer the breast whenever you think your baby might be hungry. Wake your baby if it has been 3 to 3 ½ hours since the start of the last feeding. Premis are often difficult to wake up, so if your baby is totally unreceptive, wait 15 minutes and try again. As a baby gets closer to being full-term, they will likely take their feedings closer to every 3 hours. Realize that a fussy baby is often a hungry baby, so when in doubt, offer a feeding. Sometimes, though, a fussy baby can be calmed by swaddling, rocking, rhythmical noise and suckling.

How do I hold my preterm baby to nurse? Preterm babies often have low muscle tone and are weak, so they will need extra support when being held in position at the breast. Support your baby's neck and shoulders well, but do not push on the back of the head or hold the jaw down. A baby with low muscle tone may be helped by supporting the chin, and supporting your breast will help keep your nipple in baby's mouth. Some preterm babies don't maintain their body temperature and tend to get cold easily. A cold baby won't nurse well. If you undress your baby when nursing, keep her skin in contact with your skin, so that your body heat will keep her warm. Otherwise, keep her dressed for feedings, with a stocking cap on if necessary. Babies can lose body heat via their heads.

Can preterm babies latch well? Preterm babies often have uncoordinated suck/swallow/breathing cycles. Their rooting/sucking reflexes may also be uncoordinated. Gently tapping the tip of your baby's tongue might help trigger a suck response. Do not tolerate a painful latch. Tugging and pulling can be normal, but sharpness or pinching is not. If pain persists, your nipples will likely crack and hurt more. A nipple shield may help a premature baby maintain a good vacuum and latch better. Work with a lactation consultant to determine which size fits your nipple and your baby's mouth.

What is Triple Feeding? If a premi baby doesn't nurse effectively enough to gain weight, he probably isn't completely emptying the breasts. Thus the breasts aren't stimulated enough to maintain an adequate milk supply. "Triple feeding" is often recommended to make sure a baby will gain weight and strength in order to nurse better. This process also stimulates Mom's milk supply.

Triple Feeding is a 3 step process in which Mom:

- 1) attempts to nurse her baby,
- 2) supplements the baby with expressed breast milk or formula, and
- 3) double pumps her breasts to remove any remaining milk.

The **"Triple Feeding" handout** explains this process in more detail. Once your baby is nursing well and gaining about 1 oz per day, and mom's milk supply is adequate, the triple feeding process is gradually tapered.

Will I need a breast pump? You will need a breast pump if you triple feed. The **"Breast Pump" handout** outlines your options for purchasing or renting a high quality double electric pump. If you are pumping multiple times per day, for more than a few days, a hospital grade pump might better optimize your milk production. Sometimes prolonged pumping will not maintain your milk supply, so a medication to increase your supply can be considered. (See **"Galactagogue" handout**)

How can I supplement my baby? With triple feeding, you will supplement your baby with expressed breast milk, or formula if you run out of breast milk. There are basically 5 different options to do this: 1) bottle feeding with the recommended nipple shape 2) cup feeding 3) finger feeding with a curved syringe 4) finger feeding with a syringe and feeding tube 5) feeding tube at the breast (supplemental nursing system). Each method has pros and cons and the decision as to which method is best for your baby is very individualized and can be modified at any time. Feel free to ask for help with your decision, and see the **handouts on "Bottle Feeding" and "Finger Feeding."**

Does triple feeding take a long time? Yes! You do this about every 3 hours for 24 hours per day. Hopefully, though, you'll only need to do it for a few days. Limit the time that your baby spends at the breast to 20-30 minutes. Use "breast compressions" to keep your baby actively swallowing, as explained in the handout, **"Milk is In: Breastfeeding Guidelines."** If your baby spends too much time at the breast, and then follows this with a supplemental feeding, there will be little time for either of you to rest. Your baby needs rest in order to grow and you need rest in order to produce milk.

Can I rent a scale to have at home? In some situations, it might be helpful to rent a baby scale. Daily naked weights taken before a feeding can reassure parents that their baby is gaining at least 1 ounce per day. A scale can also help determine how much milk makes it to your baby's tummy during a nursing session. This can be calculated by weighing your baby **WITH** a diaper on, before and after a feeding. The difference between the two weights is equal to how much milk your baby ingested. If you have been instructed to bottle or syringe feed your baby a certain volume of milk at each feeding, you can use the scale to determine how much milk your baby took in with nursing, and then supplement the remaining amount.

HANG IN THERE! Nursing a baby that is born a bit early can be challenging. Many of them do not communicate their hunger and fullness, so it is up to the parents to make sure they get enough to eat. Regular weight checks are the only way to know for sure that they are gaining. When your baby matures and gets stronger, she will be able to give you better cues, like crying when she is hungry and going to sleep only when her tummy is full.