Let's Talk About...

Breast milk production, stopping

Women stop breastfeeding for many different reasons. At one time, mothers received medicine to stop their milk production. That method is no longer approved for treatment in the United States. Now, we use a natural method.

Should I just stop breastfeeding and pumping?

If you stop suddenly, you can experience pain engorgement (clogged milk ducts). You are also at risk for a breast infection. It is better to stop production gradually.

Frequent emptying and stimulation of the breast increases milk supply. Emptying the breast less often and preventing breast stimulation will decrease milk supply. By following these instructions, you will remain comfortable as your body stops producing milk.

What should I do?

- Use your breast pump or hand expression when your breasts feel very full. Do not wait until your breasts are very hard.
- Do not empty the breast; pump just enough milk to relieve the pressure. When milk is left in the breast, the brain gives a signal to slow down and eventually stop milk production.
- As your milk supply decreases, you will no longer need to pump your breasts to remain comfortable.
- After pumping, use ice packs, gel packs or a package of frozen peas on each breast. To avoid freezing the skin, lay a thin towel over your breasts and lay the ice pack on the towel. The ice will help decrease milk production.
- You may use green cabbage leaves instead of ice packs or frozen peas. Wash, dry and place the cabbage leaves in a bag in the refrigerator. A Ziploc® style bag works well. Strip the large vein in the cabbage leaf by crushing it in your hands or by using a rolling pin. Apply the cabbage leaf directly to breast. Leave on the breast until the leaf begins to wilt. Repeat as desired, replacing the cabbage leaf every 2 hours. The cabbage leaf will help decrease milk production. Note that the cabbage leaf does not need to be cold to be effective.
- If you have trouble letting down your milk, you can use a warm washcloth briefly. Warmth will increase swelling and should not be used often.
- Wear a supportive bra or sports bra to keep clothes from brushing against your nipple and stimulating it. Do not bind your breasts, which will decrease circulation, increase pain, and may cause your milk ducts to become plugged.
- Take an anti-inflammatory medication, like ibuprofen, to decrease pain and swelling during the first week.
- Do not squeeze the breast to see if there is milk present. You can stimulate more milk production if you do. Small amounts of milk may remain in the breast for up to one month.

How long does it take?

It may take a few days or a week to stop milk production. How soon you stop will depend on how much milk you are currently producing and how quickly your body responds to the process.

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