

Breastfeeding Your Baby in the NICU

Congratulations on your decision to breastfeed your baby! Breast milk provides the best nutrition for the growth and development of all babies, whether they are full-term, premature, healthy, or sick.

Begin with breast pumping

There are several reasons for you to begin pumping your breast milk while your baby is in the NICU:

- If your baby is not ready to nurse at your breast, you will need to pump breast milk for feedings.
- Even if your baby is nursing, you may want to pump so that the NICU staff can feed your baby when you are not at the hospital.
- Pumping can boost your milk production and relieve engorged (overly full) breasts.

Follow the pumping guidelines below.

Use a high quality pump

- **While you are in the hospital, get a double pump kit and electric pump machine** from your nurse. The kit includes the flanges [FLANJ- ez] (the plastic funnels) and the tubing that connects to the machine. When you go home, take your pump kit with you.
- **Before you go home, ask about a pump for home use.**
 - If you need to rent a pump, you may need a prescription from your doctor. Check with your insurance provider. Most insurance companies will cover the rental cost. If you are on Medicaid and signed up with WIC, you may be able to get a pump from your local WIC office.
 - If you already own a pump, check with a lactation consultant to make sure it meets your needs.



Pump often

- **During the daytime:**
 - Pump every 2 to 3 hours (about 8 times a day). If you are pumping for multiple babies, begin by pumping 10 times a day.
 - Pump both breasts for 15 to 20 minutes per session.
 - Massage your breasts before and while pumping.
 - Get one 5-hour stretch of sleep.
- **When you visit your baby in the NICU, bring:**
 - The milk you've pumped at home. Make sure it is properly stored and labeled, and bring enough for your baby's feeding.
 - Your pump kit. You can attach it to one of the electric pumps available in the NICU. This way, you can pump while you are visiting your baby.

Breastfeeding in the NICU

When your baby begins to breastfeed, the NICU staff and lactation team will help you and your baby learn to work together. They have many resources, including books, videos, and tips to share with you. This handout will show you what to expect as you begin breastfeeding your baby in the NICU.

Enjoy skin-to-skin holding (“kangaroo care”)

If your baby’s caregivers tell you it is okay, try skin-to-skin care. This is simply holding your baby so that your bare skin touches your baby’s bare skin. Close human touch warms and comforts your baby and helps the two of you bond. Also called “kangaroo care,” skin-to-skin is especially good for breastfeeding.



If your baby is premature, follow these steps toward breastfeeding

Once your premature baby is strong enough to suck on a pacifier, they can begin to ease into breastfeeding. (This may happen when your baby reaches 33 to 34 weeks old according to the due date — the “corrected gestational age,” not the actual age.)

- First, have your baby practice at your empty breast. Pump your milk, then bring your baby to your breast. Your baby may only lick, nuzzle, and fall asleep, but that’s fine. The goal is to help your baby get comfortable at your breast.
- Next, have your baby try breastfeeding at your full breast. **You will need to go slowly at first, breastfeeding just once or twice a day until your baby is strong enough to nurse more often.** In between these early breastfeeding sessions, you will need to keep pumping.

Let your baby set the pace

It is common for breastfeeding to start slowly. At first, your baby may only want to nurse once a day. (Breastfeeding is hard work!) Sometimes, your baby may only nuzzle a bit before falling asleep. This is fine. Let your baby set the pace. Over time, your baby will gradually want to nurse more often and for longer periods of time.

Understand the NICU’s use of bottles and pacifiers

Once your baby is taking most feedings by nursing, bottles will be given when you are not available to breastfeed. Babies often take both breast and bottles without a problem. Keep pumping and bringing your milk to the NICU.

During your visit to the NICU, don’t give your baby a pacifier. It is best if **you** comfort your baby. However, the NICU staff will give your baby a pacifier if you are not available, especially if they are fussy times or having a painful procedure. The pacifier can provide comfort.

Breastfeeding beyond the NICU

Get support at home

When your baby has met all health milestones and is gaining weight, you will be able to take your baby home with you.

To help you breastfeed at home, please refer to Intermountain’s booklet: **Living and Learning Together: A Guide to Breastfeeding**. This booklet gives additional advice and resources for more one-on-one support.



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