Breastfeeding Your Sleepy Baby

Your newborn needs to nurse often — about every 2 to 3 hours. Frequent nursing gives him the nutrition he needs to grow and develop. It also stimulates your breasts to make enough breast milk.

But what if your baby is too sleepy to nurse? This is a common problem. This handout gives you some tips to manage it.

Getting in synch with your baby

• Keep your baby at your bedside and nurse often after 11 pm. In the first days of life, it’s normal for your baby to be sleepy during the day and more active at night. Make the most of this awake time by nursing him often.

• Watch for your baby’s feeding cues, and respond right away. Feeding cues are the signals your baby gives when he’s ready to nurse. Some common cues to look for include:
  – Opening his eyes
  – Bringing his hands up to his face
  – Sucking on his lips or making sucking movements with his tongue and mouth
  – Making small noises

If you notice these or any other cues, offer your breast right away. Don’t wait for your baby to begin crying — babies eat best when they’re calm.

• Let your baby be in charge. Start each feeding with the side your baby is most likely to nurse on — where it is easiest for you to get him to latch on and nurse. Letting him nurse on his favorite side rewards his early efforts to nurse and encourages him to continue. By his third or fourth day of life, he’ll probably be nursing well on both sides.

• Don’t give a pacifier (binky). Until your baby is nursing well and his stools are yellow, have him suckle at your breast only — not on a pacifier.

Tips on timing

• Breastfeed whenever your baby wakes up — before you change his diaper. In the first few days of life, most babies will wake to be fed.

• When you’re offering your breast, try for about 10 minutes before taking a break. You want to be persistent in your breastfeeding attempts, but you also want to avoid frustration. So keep sessions short. Work with your baby for 10 minutes, then hold him skin-to-skin for half an hour before trying again.

• After nursing on the first side for 10 to 15 minutes, burp your baby (or change his diaper) and offer him your other breast. With luck, he’ll nurse there, too.

• Keep track of the times you breastfeed. In the haze of the newborn period, it’s easy to lose track of time. So write down the time of each breastfeeding session — it’s the best way to know if you’re meeting the target of feeding every 2 to 3 hours.

You can use the Breastfeeding Log at the back of your Guide to Breastfeeding booklet.
When you need to wake the baby

- If it has been 3 hours since your baby has nursed, begin to wake him up for nursing.
  - Start by unwrapping him from his blanket and pulling his arms out of his shirt.
  - Place him between your bare breasts (dad’s bare chest will work too).
  - Gently rub your baby’s back and talk or sing to him to see if you can wake him enough to feed him.

- If it has been 4 hours since your baby nursed, be a little more insistent. Dim the lights in the room, then try these “wake-up” tactics:
  - Change his diaper and wash his bottom
  - Take his shirt off
  - Wash his face
  - Rub and pat his back
  - Tickle his feet
  - Massage his elbow
  - Sit him up and continue rubbing and patting his back
  - Talk to your baby, and tell him what you want him to do: “It’s time to wake up. You need to eat.”

If your baby won’t breastfeed after 4 hours, ask your nurse for help.

Skin-to-skin holding is a wonderful warm-up for a breastfeeding session. Also called “kangaroo care,” skin-to-skin means holding your baby so that your bare chests are touching.

Nighttime is the right time (and so is the daytime). Nurse your baby every 2 to 3 hours, around the clock.