Emotional and Physical Preparation for Breast Feeding

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Overview
Breast feeding—a simple process? After all, your body already has the equipment and the supplies. You deliver your baby, your baby latches on to one of your breasts—and before you know it, you are feeding your baby! Well, maybe it is not quite that simple after all. Breast feeding (or nursing) is one of the most natural processes in the world; however, for some mothers it feels strange, even awkward at first. And, more likely than not, mothers encounter a few bumps, if not major roadblocks, on the road to feeding their baby. So here is some information that might make the transition to breast feeding a little easier.

The Body Basics: Physical Preparation
Before your infant arrives, and maybe even before you made your decision to breast feed, your body has been preparing to feed your child. In fact, your body starts preparing the minute you get pregnant. You may have noticed that your nipples are getting darker and your breasts appear to be getting bigger. It is not your imagination. Your breasts are enlarging as your milk-producing cells multiply and your milk-carrying ducts develop. In addition, your body is storing extra fat to provide excess energy that you will need for lactation. And, as your breasts become bigger, they become heavier. That means it is time to buy new bras in new sizes. Idea: If you want to help prevent your breasts from sagging prematurely, buy and wear bras that will provide really good support, such as nursing bras even before your baby’s arrival. There’s no need to wait until you’re actually nursing.

Getting Started
Once you have made the decision to breast feed, you need to tell your doctor and/or the people at the hospital where you will deliver your baby. They have the experience to get you started learning about breast feeding. They will probably put you in touch with a lactation coach or nurse who can fill you in on the basics. Your coach will prepare you to start breast feeding as soon as possible after delivery. The benefits of starting breast feeding early are considerable, such as enhancing your breasts’ milk production (or lactation) and helping your newborn get used to nursing. And, there is often nothing more soothing and pleasant, to both mother and baby, than direct skin-to-skin contact—a built-in feature of breast feeding. Many mothers report that breast feeding also makes them more confident about...
their ability to care for their newborn. Early breast feeding nurtures maternal feelings and feelings of attachment between a mother and her baby.

WHEN DO YOU START?
In a perfect world, you might be feeding within 30 to 60 minutes after delivery. Sometimes, it just doesn’t work that way. If you are completely exhausted from delivery, groggy from medication, in pain from cramping, or there were delivery complications, it is likely that you are first breast-feeding session will be delayed. Never fear.

Although breast feeding is recommended as soon as possible after delivery, your ability to nurse your child will not be harmed if the first feeding is delayed a while. The bond between a mother and child starts during the pregnancy, but only fully develops over time. You will have plenty of time after you or your baby have recovered, to cuddle, nurture, and feed your child, even if breast feeding does not start as soon or go as smoothly as you had expected.

THE FIRST FEW DAYS
For first few days after delivery, your breasts will be soft to touch as the blood supply increases, and milk-producing cells start to function efficiently. Eventually, your breasts will become firmer. And when you first start feeding, your breasts will not actually be producing milk. They will first produce a substance called colostrum, a rich-yet-thin-appearing, orange-yellow substance that contains protein, salt, disease-fighting antibodies, and other important nutrients.

WHAT TO EXPECT
Once your baby begins sucking at your nipples, your breasts will receive a signal to make more milk and increase the flow to the nipple. This is called the let-down reflex. In the very beginning, newborns eat little, about half an ounce per feeding. However, they feed frequently (every 2 to 3 hours). By the third or fourth day of feeding/nursing, your breasts will begin to produce both colostrum and milk, and may feel fuller. By this time, your baby will have increased his or her intake to about an ounce per feeding.

Do not be surprised if you feel pains while breast feeding. There are two major reasons: one is that the hormones that stimulate your milk flow also causes uterus contractions, helping your uterus to return to its normal size and position (another advantage to breast feeding). So you may feel some “after pain” or cramping of the uterus each time you nurse. In addition, your breasts may feel painful because they are engorged, or overly full, of milk. Some women use their hands or a breast pump to force (or express) unused milk from their breasts to relieve this pressure.

Beyond the Body Basics: Emotional Preparation
Some babies “latch on and catch on” right away, with others it takes more time and patience, and some infants never really get the hang of breast feeding. This can be because they have a under-developed sucking reflex, or an under- or over-bite that makes it hard for them to latch on to your breast, and sometimes, infants simply do not show much interest in feeding at the breast.

Do not panic if breast feeding does not go smoothly at first. It can take several days before your baby latches on and feeds well. These are the days that leave many new mothers feeling frustrated and uncertain of themselves. Here are some suggestions that may make those first few days a little easier.

TEACH YOURSELF CONFIDENCE
Believe you can do it. Women have been breast feeding successfully since the beginning of time, even though many have experienced the challenges mentioned earlier. So, there is every reason to expect that you will also succeed. Your body is set up to provide all the nutrition your baby needs, and your baby is born with the reflexes needed to latch on and get that nutrition from you.

Granted, it may take some practice before nursing becomes second nature to both of you, and it may not always feel pleasant and rewarding, but hang in there. Many women before you have breast-fed their babies, experienced the
frustrations that you may experience, and survived. So, you have plenty of people to talk to about nursing your child. Do not be shy and never be too proud to ask for advice. Talk to other women about breast feeding, and talk to your lactation coach or nurse. The best parents are the ones who learn from others’ experiences.

TEACH YOURSELF TO RELAX

Relax. Trust your body. It’s been preparing for about nine months now and is ready to begin milk production once your baby is born. And once it starts, do not expect milk to come gushing out. It usually takes three or four days for your milk to come in.

Your baby’s sucking motion signals your body to produce milk. So you see, everything is in place. You just have to wait for it to happen. Which, is easier said than done. Often, it seems that new mothers can not wait for the experience of their newborn feeding contentedly at their breast. And, it is not unusual for mothers get stressed over concerns that nursing is not going “like it is supposed to.” Mothers seem to worry first and foremost about whether their child is eating enough, particularly when their newborn loses some weight right after birth (a natural event that happens regardless of how much a newborn eats).

TEACH YOURSELF PATIENCE

Nurses at the hospital and your child’s pediatrician will be monitoring to make sure that your baby is eating enough. A few signs that they look for are a minimum of four wet diapers daily (meaning that a newborn is receiving enough water and nutrients to keep their digestive tract functioning), feeding episodes that last for more than 10 minutes at a time, the development of smooth skin after the first week and a round face after around three weeks.

Remember the old saying, “A watched pot does not boil?” The same is true for breast feeding. Focusing on waiting for the milk to come in and being stressed out can actually slow milk production. But what mother is not stressed out at some point with her new infant?

Here are a few practical suggestions to help you relax and take care of yourself, when you want to nurse your baby:

- Find a quiet corner or room where you will not be disturbed.
- If possible, especially at first, have someone (husband, partner, relative, friend) take care of things such as phone calls, answering the door, etc., during breast feeding.
- Take long, slow deep breaths to prepare yourself and help you relax during feeding.
- Drink milk, juice, or water to help give your body extra fluids to produce breast milk.
- Sit in a comfortable chair with good support for your back and arms.
- Listen to soothing music.
- Wear loose clothing.
- Make contact, cuddle, and caress your baby with your hands, eyes, and voice.
- Burp your baby several times while nursing. (Nursing babies suck in air as well as milk.) Burping brings up the excess air. Sometimes a baby who is fussy while nursing may just need a burp.

GIVE YOU AND YOUR BABY TIME

Breast feeding is something that is entirely new, for you AND your baby. It is going to take a little while to get used to it, and it may take a little while before you settle into your routine. It’s like you are both learning how to ride a bicycle. You may feel very confident up until the birth of your child, and then, it feels as if the training wheels have come off.

Some mothers feel exhilarated on one hand, but a little awkward and scared on the other. It will take time for your newborn to learn how to latch on and suck, and it will take time for you to learn to read the signs that communicate that your baby is hungry or full. And most of all, it will take time for your milk to come in.

Strategies that Work

TAKE CUES FROM YOUR BABY

Your baby will both let you know when he or she is hungry and when he or she is full. Your baby will also teach you cues so your body learns when to start and stop producing milk. Examples. Usually, if a baby is hungry, he or she will cry, nuzzle, or make sucking motions and fuss. Babies are also generally happy and content when they have finished nursing. Fussiness during feeding can be a sign that the baby is still hungry or has gas.

Learn to calm your baby down before starting a feeding. Although you can use the clock as a general guideline of when to feed the baby (most babies eat every 3 to 4 hours), pay more attention to your baby’s signals to help determine when it’s time to eat.
Granted, in the beginning, these signals can be tough to figure out, and trying to figure out what a fussy baby wants can be one of the most frustrating experiences of parenting.

**SOMETIMES A BREAK IS NEEDED**

Realize this, some babies are just naturally fussy. You put them to breast, they may latch on, and then… nothing. You take them off, and they begin to fuss again. Teach yourself to relax in these situations. Worrying over baby’s fussing is likely to make you more uptight which can lead to difficulties in getting your milk to let down. Plus, feeding is a great time for establishing a nurturing bond with your child. If it turns into a hassle, take a break, your child will not starve if a feeding is delayed for awhile.

You will gradually get to know your babies signals, but again, it takes time. It can be a struggle and a little overwhelming at first trying to figure out what your baby is trying to say.

**INVOLVE THE DADDY AND OTHER FAMILY MEMBERS**

If you are breast feeding, it is possible that Daddy or other members of the family may feel left out. They do not get to enjoy holding the baby and watching him/her eat in quite the same way. Often, a special bond seems to develop between a mother and her baby, and other family members may actually experience some envy over this new relationship.

There are lots of things you can do to keep the family involved, and many of these things also help you out. First and foremost, talk about what’s involved in feeding the baby—what to expect, the schedule (the time involved, the frequency), the importance of helping Mommy relax, how others can help by taking care of other household responsibilities, etc. Talk with each other about your feelings about and the experience of breast feeding.

- Let Dad or other family members bring the baby to you when it's time to breast feed.
- Let Dad or other family members burp the baby.
- Involve Dad or others in other aspects of child’s care, but not just diaper-changing. Teach them how the baby likes to be put to bed, for example.
- If you have a breast pump, pump extra milk to put in a baby bottle kept in the refrigerator. Using bottled breast milk allows others to enjoy the special bond that feeding promotes while offering your baby all the nutritional advantages of breast milk. It also allows Mom to take a break from caring for the baby, which is very important.

It is very important to keep family members involved in the care of the baby from the start. You are establishing bonding and caring patterns. The more you keep others involved in the beginning, the more likely it is that they will stay involved in the baby’s care as the baby gets older.

**Remember, Feeding Patterns Vary**

As mentioned earlier, babies take to breast feeding in very different ways—and some never do. Your baby may be one of the following:

**The Barracuda, who gets down to business.** As soon as he or she is put to breast, he or she will grasp the nipple and suck energetically, sometimes biting down too hard. Usually, Barracudas become less eager as time goes on.

**The Impatient One,** who is so excited about breast feeding that he or she does not feed very well. He or she may become frantic at the sight of the breast, grab on to the nipple, lose it, and then become frustrated. You might have to calm your baby several times during each feeding. Usually, feeding this type of baby soon after waking and before he or she gets too hungry helps keep this type of baby calmer.

**The Procrastinator,** who does not seem to be interested in nursing until the milk comes in. If this is the case, there is no use in trying to force him or her. The best solution is to wait them out. Your baby will still need fluids, however, and you should check with your doctor or nurse about getting the right fluids to your baby. Also, talk with your child’s
Pediatrician about whether you need to supplement their feedings with formula. Usually, once Procrastinators start, they do well at breastfeeding. Idea: if your baby is resistant to feeding, use an electric or manual pump between feedings to stimulate milk production. That is because a non-aggressive feeder may not stimulate your breasts enough for milk production.

The Mouther, who plays with the nipple: tasting the milk first, and smacking their lips before digging in. If hurried or prodded, he or she may become furious and cry in protest. Patience is the key, here. After a few minutes of playing, they usually settle down to business and nurse well.

The Rester, who nurses a few minutes, takes a rest, and then nurses again. He or she may fall asleep, even, and then awakens ready for more. Mothers often complain that they can not seem to hurry this child through their feeding. One of the biggest inconveniences of having a child who nurses in this pattern is that mothers often feel that they are “held hostage” by the Rester’s feeding schedule. This type of baby feeds off and on for an hour—and 45 minutes later is hungry again. Opinions differ on how to handle Resters. Some lactation coaches state that there is little that you can do to change this pattern and that the baby will just naturally become more efficient in their feeding in a few weeks. Others argue that when the child is not feeding mothers should NOT keep them at the breast for extended periods of time. These coaches argue that this strategy trains the child to eat more efficiently when the breast is presented. Consider both opinions and perhaps try “training” your child to eat efficiently for a few days to see how it goes. It’s likely that this strategy will work for some, but not all. Remember, babies feed in a variety of patterns.

Parting Remarks
It is important to remember that breastfeeding, although natural, does not always go smoothly and doesn’t necessarily feel natural. As mentioned before, it takes time and practice. If you are having trouble getting started, that is normal. You are just getting used to something new.

Most mothers find breastfeeding extremely rewarding in many ways, but not all do. Some mothers really do not enjoy it as much as they thought they would, and that is okay. Sometimes breastfeeding becomes a frustrating task as the child has difficulty feeding or milk fails to come in. Learn to do what works for you, your baby, and your family. Although breastfeeding has its benefits, it is most important that you develop feeding practices that make you and your child comfortable and happy. Above all, feeding your child should remain a special time that builds the bond between you and releases stress instead of creating it.

References