

Prematurity and the NICU

Premature babies (born three or more weeks before their due date) need extra love and care. Your breastmilk is one of the most important things you can give your preemie. No other nourishment compares to breastmilk and preemies need all the nourishment they can get! Breastmilk offers preemies wonderful benefits to help them grow and develop properly.

Preemies need breastmilk.

All babies need the usual benefits of breastmilk, but for preemies, the benefits are even more important. Premature babies are at greater risk of having health problems early in life, and they face other special challenges as well.

Challenge	How breastmilk helps
Preemies are at a higher risk for medical problems than full-term babies.	Your milk is the only food that contains antibodies and other substances that protect your baby from disease.
Premature babies need different nutrients than babies who are carried to full-term.	Your milk has special nutrients that your baby needs. They will help your baby grow and get out of the hospital sooner.
Your baby's digestive system may not be fully developed.	Your milk is easy for your baby to digest and will help complete the development of your baby's digestive system. It also means fewer tummy aches.

Breastfeeding your preemie:

There are many challenges to breastfeeding a baby in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU). Don't be shy about letting the nurses know that you plan to breastfeed. Babies who are born early can't always feed at the breast right away. Because of their small size and lack of muscle development, they may have a harder time latching on or staying latched on to the breast. Feedings can take longer than normal because of this. Hang in there, Mom, and don't give up. If you need help, the hospital's Lactation Consultants can provide great support.

If your baby cannot breastfeed:

In the beginning, you may need to pump breastmilk that can be given to your baby through a spoon, cup, bottle, or tube. Your baby will still get the same rich nutrients from your pumped breastmilk. If your baby cannot breastfeed, pump both of your breasts using an electric breast pump. It's important to start as soon as possible and to pump often. The more you breastfeed or pump, the more milk your body will make. [For enrolled and eligible WIC moms](#), WIC may have breast pumps available. If you think you may need a breast pump and are enrolled or eligible, [call your local WIC clinic](#). If your baby needs breastmilk before your milk comes in, you may be able to get breastmilk from your local milk bank.

Eventually your baby will be strong enough to nurse from your breast. Most premature babies become much better at breastfeeding around the time of their original due date, so don't give up if your baby doesn't latch right away. Keep trying! You can also get help from your hospital's Lactation Consultant or call the **24-Hour Breastfeeding Hotline at 1-800-833-4642**.

How often should I pump?

If your baby is in the NICU or unable to latch onto the breast, you will need to pump each time your baby would have had a feeding. This will ensure that you have plenty of milk for your baby. Plan to pump 8-12 times throughout the day and night, or every two to three hours, for the first two weeks. Pump both breasts at the same time for 10-15 minutes each session. Mothers of multiples will need to pump longer and more frequently.

How much milk should I get?

At first, you may only get a few drops of colostrum. Don't worry—that's totally normal. Your baby only needs tiny amounts of your milk in the first few days, and your colostrum is rich in antibodies and nutrients. As you continue to pump, your milk quantity will begin to increase and your supply will get stronger. You can expect to get between ½ to 2 ounces each time you pump.

The importance of skin-to-skin care:

It's important to ask the nurses and staff whether you and your partner can have skin-to-skin time with your baby while your baby is in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU). Some people call it "kangaroo care." No matter what you call it, it will benefit both you and your baby.

During skin-to-skin care, your baby dressed only in a hat and diaper, will be placed against you, with a blanket over his back. Contact with your skin will help your preemie feel calm and relaxed and it will help your baby gain weight. It will also help your body produce milk that will protect your baby from bacteria while in the NICU. You should plan to spend at least an hour every day holding your baby like this while he is in the NICU.

Try to pump your milk right after holding your baby against your skin. This contact will help release hormones that allow you to pump more milk and this will help build your milk supply. The hospital will most likely be able to provide a hospital-grade pump you can use. Bring your breast pump with you to the NICU if they don't have one you can use.

Support in the NICU:

Having a premature baby can be stressful and lonely, but you and your partner don't have to do it alone. It can be helpful to talk to other parents who have had a baby in the NICU and who understand what you're going through. For additional referrals, ask your hospital's social workers or call the **24-Hour Breastfeeding Hotline at 1-800-833-4642**.

Information adapted from Texas WIC, <http://www.breastmilkcounts.com/good-for-preemies.php>



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Arizona Department of Health Services 2015