

Breastfeeding

Deciding whether to breastfeed

Your baby being in a neonatal unit may have come as an enormous shock to you, but the good news is that you can still do many of the things you planned, including breastfeeding. Even if you have decided against breastfeeding, you could express your breastmilk for a little while.

Mothers transfer protective antibodies to their babies through the placenta, during the last three months of pregnancy. This process is broken when the baby is born prematurely. For this reason, premature babies are especially vulnerable to infection. The good news is that mothers also give their babies antibodies in breast milk, by providing breast milk you give your baby an extra line of defence.

Advantages of breastmilk

- Breast milk provides antibodies that protect your baby against bacteria and viruses. Premature breast milk is extra rich in antibodies and growth factors.
- It boosts your baby's immune system and protects against infections, such as stomach and chest infections.
- It provides nutrients, growth factors and hormones that help your baby grow and develop during the vital early months after birth.
- It is very easy to digest and is absorbed more easily than formula milks.
- It allows you to have skin to skin contact with your baby. Research has shown that this is very beneficial especially for premature babies.
- Breastfeeding is good for your health too. It can help you regain your pre-pregnancy figure, since any extra fat stored by the body during pregnancy is used as to produce breast milk. There is also some evidence that breastfeeding reduces your risk of breast and ovarian cancer.

First milk

The first milk mothers produce is called colostrum. Colostrum is thicker and more yellow in colour than breastmilk. It contains a rich mix of proteins, including antibodies that can help protect against infections.

Your baby may not be ready to feed straight from your breast, so you can provide milk from your breast by using a technique called expressing. Expressing breast milk is a skill that can take a time to learn, and the staff looking after your baby will give you positive support and practical help with this.

Methods of expressing milk

There are various options available to help you express your milk, you may use a combination of methods to suit your needs:

- Electric pumps that are found in the hospital are a good choice if you will have to express for a long time. There are several types, and most can be adapted to allow single or double pumping. Electric breast pumps can be rented if your unit can't lend you one, you can find a number of suppliers in our [Useful Organisations](#) factsheet.
- Hand pumps are either manual or electric and are a cheaper option and easier to find. With manual hand pumps suction is created by squeezing a handle, which can prove quite tiring after a while. The battery or mains operated versions can save you save you time and energy.
- Hand expressing is the most basic way of expressing your milk, and it is an important skill to learn. Do ask for help if you have any questions or problems.
- Sometimes it can be difficult to express enough milk to supply all your baby's needs so in the early days you may need to supplement (top up) your colostrum to ensure your baby receives enough energy and fluids.

If you choose to breastfeed, you should express your milk as soon as possible, breast milk can be frozen and stored, until your baby is ready to feed. As with all newborn babies, some find breastfeeding easier than others. This can depend on factors such as the baby's age, maturity and his or her medical condition. For premature babies, there is usually a gradual steady progress towards 'ordinary breastfeeding'. At birth breastfeeding may have to be delayed so feeding is provided by tube feeding where a tiny tube is passed through the nose into your baby's stomach.

Giving breastmilk is something best done by you and it may help you to feel closer to your baby, but you must feel happy with whatever you decide to do.

For more information, download our booklet [Breastfeeding your premature baby](#).

*Further advice, support and publications can be requested by phoning our Family Support Helpline on freephone **0500 618140**. The line is open from 9am to 9pm, Monday to Friday. You can also email us at enquiries@bliss.org.uk*