

For New Moms or Moms-To-Be: Breastfeeding Twins

Deciding whether or not to breastfeed is a personal decision, but if you are an expectant or new mother of twins, the decision takes on a new dimension. There are logistics to consider after all. While having multiples does make nursing more challenging, the benefits to your babies and yourself can make it a rewarding, enjoyable experience.

Breast milk has more than 100 ingredients not found in infant formula, and the milk provided by a mother constantly changes to meet the needs of her baby. For example, breast milk contains more water in hot, humid weather and contains more calories in cold, damp weather. Breast milk will contain more proteins, fats and calories when your baby enters a growth spurt.

Babies receive other benefits from breast milk, such as easy digestibility. Mother's milk contains less sodium and protein than formula, putting less stress on babies' kidneys. Research suggests that breast fed babies are less likely to suffer from diabetes, childhood cancer and sudden infant death syndrome. Studies have also shown breastfed babies are less likely to suffer from allergies, constipation and diaper rash.

The benefits to baby from nursing do vary based on the amount of time a mother continues to breastfeed, but any amount of time spent nursing does provide some benefit to baby because mother's milk contains antibodies. Mother's milk and even colostrum, the thin pre-milk provided just after birth, contains enzymes, immunoglobulins and white blood cells which help protect infants from infections.

Breastfeeding is also beneficial to a new mother in that there are no bottles or formula to prepare. Mother's milk is always ready and always the right temperature. Nursing is also a money saver - formula for two can be very expensive. Research suggests nursing helps new mothers lose weight faster and provides some protection against breast and ovarian cancer. Most articles and books on nursing also say that breastfeeding helps mother and child bond in a special way.

The Logistics

There are also disadvantages to nursing, which are evident with a singleton or twin babies. Nursing keeps a mother on call 24-hours a day and feedings tend to be more frequent than with bottle-feeding because mother's milk is not as heavy as formula.

There are ways to circumvent some of these disadvantages, such as expressing breast milk to skip some feedings, but these tactics cannot really be used until the mother and baby have established a good nursing relationship (there are exceptions to this in the case of premature infants).

With twins, the disadvantages may seem larger. Mothers question how they can nurse two hungry babies, will there be enough milk and, of course, do I really want to do this? Don't dismiss the idea of nursing just because the questions of logistics seem overwhelming. It is possible to successfully nurse twins.

The production of breast milk by a mother is based on simple supply and demand. The more a mother nurses her baby, the more milk she will produce. There is no exception when it comes to twins; if a mother is nursing two babies, her body will produce enough milk to satisfy two babies.

A mother of twins can nurse her babies together or nurse them one at a time. Nursing two together does take practice but it can be accomplished in a number of ways. First, a mother needs a lot of pillows to help position her babies or she may purchase a nursing pillow designed specifically for twins. With either method, there are two holds which work best when attempting to nurse twins simultaneously: the football hold and the football/cradle hold.

A mother can position both babies in a football hold which means cradling the baby's head on the breast and the baby's body under her arm. Another popular position is one baby in a front-facing cradle hold and the second baby in a football hold. Smaller babies can be nursed simultaneously in cradle holds but as they get bigger it will get more difficult to juggle that position.

The easiest way for a mother to get herself and her babies into position is of course with help. But if help is unavailable and a mother finds herself alone with two screaming, hungry infants, there are a few tricks a mother can use. Set yourself up in your favorite nursing place and lay both babies next to you as you position your pillow or pillows. Lay one baby on the pillow closest to your body but do not have the baby latch-on until you pick the other baby up and have both within easy access. Latch one on at a time and you will be amazed at how talented you really are!

Of course, problems may arise when one baby is done before the other, but that baby is typically asleep and you can just let him/her rest until the other baby is done. When both babies are finished eating, you can usually slide one baby next to you while you burp the other one. Repeat a second time with second baby and the feeding is finished.

Typically, a mother of twins will not have to nurse her twins simultaneously all of the time, unless of course she chooses to. The babies often wake to eat at different times or within 10 or so minutes of each other so it is possible to nurse them separately.

Preemies

A common occurrence with twins is that they often arrive prematurely and this does affect establishing a nursing relationship. However, prematurity is another excellent reason to give nursing a try in that a mother's milk provides antibodies which can help a small infant fight infections.

When a new mother is unable to nurse her infant, the best solution is to rent an electric double-breast pump in order to establish and maintain her milk supply. Babies in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) will be given tube feedings until they are strong enough to drink from a bottle or attempt to nurse. Milk expressed through pumping can be stored and given to nurses in the NICU who will then use the milk to feed your children.

As soon as mothers are given the go-ahead, they should attempt to nurse their premature babies and they should expect it to be a little trickier. Premature babies are weak and often slow to feed and hard to latch-on, but nurses in the NICU or a lactation consultant can help show a mother the way. Nursing premature babies takes patience and vigilance but the benefits to the babies are many.

If you are considering nursing and your babies happen to be premature, don't give up on the idea of breastfeeding. Just accept that the road to establishing a good nursing relationship will take a little longer.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON NURSING

La Leche League International: (800) LALECHE or use the web site: www.laleche.league.org

Sources:

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