

Dads and Breastfeeding

Congratulations on your new baby!

Breastfeeding is the natural and normal way to feed a baby. By choosing to make your baby a breastfed baby, you and your partner are giving your baby the very best start. Breastfed babies are likely to be healthier throughout their lives and are protected against a wide range of illnesses and infections. There are also long-term health benefits for your partner, such as a lower risk of ovarian and breast cancer and osteoporosis. And, of course, breastfeeding is free.

Breastfeeding: the basics

Breastfeeding works best on a supply and demand basis. The more a baby feeds, the more milk mum will make, so it is best to offer the breast whenever baby shows signs of being hungry. Letting baby suckle for comfort is also really good for mum's milk supply. There is no need to follow a schedule or try to space out feeds. It's best to forget the clock, and simply follow what baby shows you they need.

A newborn baby has a stomach approximately the size of a marble so its capacity to hold milk is small. Plus, breast milk is easily digested by the gut so, within a short amount of time, baby will want to feed again, usually within a couple of hours, sometimes more frequently.

There may be a time in the day where the baby appears to want to feed continuously for a few hours. This is called 'cluster feeding' and can be a particularly frustrating time. You and your partner may wonder if baby is getting enough milk or if there is something wrong, but it helps if you know that is a normal part of a young baby's feeding pattern. It's how milk supply develops and changes to meet your baby's needs. Your partner may find that there are some days when baby wants to feed more often than usual. This is a growth spurt and usually only lasts a couple of days.

How can I bond with my baby too?

Breastfeeding promotes a very strong bond between mother and baby, and some dads worry that they might miss out on bonding if mum breastfeeds. However, there are lots of other ways that dads can get to know their baby. Breastfeeding releases oxytocin - the love hormone - in both mum and baby which helps to bond them. It's the same hormone which is released when you kiss, hold hands or hug your partner. It facilitates falling in love and builds strong bonds between the two of you. Oxytocin works in the same way between you and your baby. That daddy cuddle works magic on a scientific level.

Letting your baby lie against your bare chest, and whilst they are bare too (which you will hear called 'skin-to-skin'), helps regulate the baby's heartbeat and body temperature. You could perhaps bathe with your baby in the family bath. When daddy rocks, paces and sings, mum gets a rest and baby feels reassured and safe.

Many people say that allowing dad to bottlefeed the baby helps with bonding but there is absolutely no evidence to show this is the case. Some couples do choose to express breast milk so that dad can feed baby and mum can have a break. However it's best to wait until breastfeeding is well established before you do this (after the first few weeks) because if a baby uses a bottle too early this can affect their ability to breastfeed properly or interfere with mum's milk supply.

How can I support my partner?

Know your stuff. Reassurance goes a long way at 2am when the baby is up for the third time and crying. Let your partner know that what she's doing is worth it, that she's doing great and you support her. You could go along to a breastfeeding support group with her and get information to help you both understand breastfeeding better.

Antenatal education is important too. It's crucial that you are also educated about breastfeeding and how milk supply works. It's often dads who are better able to observe the baby latching on and get a 360 degree view. If you've prepared during your partner's pregnancy, you really can make all the difference. Looking after a baby is a full time job and can be very tiring, especially at first. It can be very helpful if you can take on more of the domestic tasks such as cooking (especially meals that can be eaten with one hand!) and cleaning.

Mums often put their baby's needs before their own, so you can support your partner by ensuring that she gets enough to eat and drink, and rests when she can. Ensure she has healthy, filling foods available to grab. You can make sandwiches and leave them covered in the fridge, chop veggie crudité's or fruit salads and have them in bowls. If friends and family offer help say yes — perhaps they could bake a lasagne and drop it round?

Some mums initially feel self conscious about breastfeeding in public. Your partner may welcome your support in getting out and about until she gets the hang of this. Your family and friends may not be as well informed about breastfeeding as you, or know what is normal breastfed baby behaviour. You may be the one who has to speak to people and surround your partner with care and support.

Lots of visitors in the early days may impact on breastfeeding and it may be down to you to act as gate-keeper and ensure any visitors who do arrive are making the dinner and sorting out the washing rather than expecting cups of tea.

Sometimes with the later growth spurts, such as at 12 weeks and, later on, the four month 'sleep regression', mothers can really struggle. The excitement of there being a new baby has died down and most offers of help have dried up. Remind your closest friends and family that your partner may need a bit of extra support at these times.

My partner is in so much pain while breastfeeding, is this normal?

Pain during breastfeeding is not considered usual. If the mum is experiencing a lot of pain and discomfort it might be advisable to seek advice from a breastfeeding counsellor, lactation consultant or breastfeeding support group. There are different reasons as to why pain is happening, and professional expertise might be needed to resolve these issues. You may be the one who has to find the support she needs and gently guide her in the right direction.

When a mum has just given birth she may be feeling especially vulnerable and emotional. Midwives and health visitors will be able to tell you about local support groups. You could also call one of the national helplines: ABM 0300 330 5453 or NBH 0300 100 0212

Can I still be intimate with my partner whilst she is breastfeeding?

Yes. Breastfeeding does not prevent intimacy. It just depends on when you both agree it is right. If the mum is exclusively breastfeeding day and night, there is considerable contraceptive protection as well, though you may not want to rely on this method if intervals between feeds get longer or as your baby approaches six months. A breastfeeding counsellor

can tell you more about the conditions needed for breast-feeding to give reliable contraceptive protection.

Some couples find this is a time when they feel especially close and sex continues naturally – although sleep deprivation may cause some difficulties. Other couples may take a little longer to get back into the groove. This is completely normal. Be tender and affectionate and empathic. Talk about how you're feeling but understand that this baby phase really doesn't last long.

And finally, there may be times when you feel you need extra support. Dads are welcome to phone the helplines too. Don't feel you have to have all the answers. Research shows clearly that a supportive partner is crucial in making breastfeeding successful. Do not underestimate your importance.

Association of Breastfeeding Mothers

Helpline 0300 330 5453

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