

# Partners 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, and breast milk is easily portable.

## Breastfeeding: the basics

Breastfeeding works best on a supply and demand basis. The more a baby feeds, the more milk the breastfeeding parent will make, so it is best to offer the breast whenever baby shows signs of being hungry. Letting a baby suckle for comfort is also really good for the 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 the baby shows you they need.

A newborn baby has a stomach about 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, the 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. A baby may also want to feed more when having a growth spurt; this usually only lasts for a couple of days at a 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.

## How can I bond with my baby too?

Breastfeeding promotes a very strong bond between the breastfeeding parent and the baby, and some non-breastfeeding partners worry that they might miss out on bonding. However, there are lots of other ways that parents can get to know their baby.

Breastfeeding releases oxytocin - the love hormone - in both the breastfeeder and the 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 a parent and a baby.

Letting your baby lie against your bare chest, especially 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 or walk with the baby in a sling. While you're rocking, pacing and singing, your partner gets a rest and baby feels reassured and safe.

Many people say that allowing a non-breastfeeding partner 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 breastmilk so that the other parent can feed baby and the breast-feeder can have a break, although expressing may also tire the breastfeeding parent. If this is something you want to try, 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 the 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 breastfeeding is worth it, that your partner is doing great and you are supportive. You could go along to a breastfeeding support group with your partner and get information to help you both understand breastfeeding better.

Antenatal education is important too. It's crucial that you're educated about breastfeeding and how milk supply works. Non-breastfeeding partners are often better able to observe the baby latching on and to 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), cleaning, and caring for any other children.

Breastfeeding parents often put their baby's needs before their own, so you can support your partner by ensuring there is enough for your partner to eat and drink and that your partner rests as much as possible.

Ensure there are healthy, filling foods available to grab. You can make sandwiches and leave them covered in the fridge, chop vegie crudités 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 parents initially feel self-conscious about breastfeeding in public. Your partner may welcome your support in getting out and about, particularly early on. Your family and friends may not be as well informed about breastfeeding as you, or they may not 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. It may be down to you to act as gatekeeper and to ensure any visitors who do arrive are making the dinner and sorting the washing rather than expecting cups of tea. Sometimes with the later growth spurts, such as at 12 weeks, or challenging times, such as the four month 'sleep regression' or when teeth begin to come in, breastfeeding parents can really struggle. The excitement of 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. And continue to support your partner too.

## **My partner is in so much pain while breastfeeding - is this normal?**

Pain during breastfeeding is not considered usual. If the breastfeeding parent 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 your partner needs.

When someone has just given birth they may be feeling especially vulnerable and emotional. Midwives and health visitors will be able to tell you about local support groups.

You could call one of the national helplines:

ABM 0300 330 5453 9.30am - 10.30pm

NBH 0300 100 0212 9.30am - 9.30pm

## **Can I breastfeed too?**

If you are a woman and it is your partner who has given birth but you want to share breastfeeding, it is possible to induce lactation and share breastfeeding, even if you have never given birth. You may want to see a lactation consultant to get further advice on this and to learn more about how you can prepare.

## **Can I still be intimate with my partner while she is breastfeeding?**

Yes. Breastfeeding does not prevent intimacy. It just depends on when you both agree it is right. You may also find that someone who has given birth and is breastfeeding feels differently about their body and how they want to be touched. This is something to discuss. If the breastfeeding partner is exclusively breast-feeding day and night, there is considerable contraceptive protection with regard to intercourse, 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 breastfeeding 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.

There may be times when you feel you need extra support too. Partners are welcome to phone the helplines. Don't feel you have to have all the answers. Research shows that a supportive partner is crucial in making breastfeeding successful. Don't underestimate your own importance.

*Our short online Partner Module will help you understand what your breastfeeding partner is going through and how you can help her. Easily accessible from your phone or your laptop. See <https://courses.abm.support/courses/partner-module-a-toolkit-for-supporting-a-mum-to-breastfeed/> for details.*

## **Association of Breastfeeding Mothers**

enquiries: 08444 122948 admin@abm.me.uk

ABM, PO Box 207, Bridgwater TA6 7YT

© ABM 2017 registered charity no: 280537 E&OE