

Breastfeeding the Late Preterm Infant

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Babies born between 34 and 37 weeks gestation may not have health problems or look premature, but they sometimes have challenges learning to breastfeed. They may nurse well during their “alert time” right after birth, but feedings may not go well when your baby gets sleepy, after being discharged from the hospital. It often takes preterm babies several weeks to gain the energy needed to breastfeed successfully. Until then, lactation support is often needed to help your baby get over the hump.

Feeding Frequency in a Late Preterm Infant

Late preterm babies usually sleep longer than full-term infants and are often hard to wake up. Wake your baby if it has been 2.5–3 hours since the last feeding. If your baby doesn’t wake up right away, place your baby skin-to-skin and watch for feeding cues in the next 15–20 minutes. Undressing or changing the diaper may help to wake your baby. A fussy baby is often a hungry baby and may also be calmed by skin-to-skin, swaddling, rocking, rhythmical noise and suckling. Watch your baby carefully for feeding cues. When in doubt, offer a feeding.

Positioning Your Late Preterm Baby at the Breast

Late preterm babies often have low muscle tone and tire easily. They’ll need extra support when at the breast. The cross-cradle or “football” hold works best. Use pillows to support your baby’s neck and shoulders. Don’t push on the back of your baby’s head or hold his/her jaw down. Support your breast so that your nipple is lined up with your baby’s nose. This will help get more of the breast and nipple into your baby’s mouth. Some late preterm infants get cold easily and a cold baby won’t nurse well. If undressed, keep your baby skin-to-skin with you for warmth. Otherwise keep your baby dressed for feedings, with a hat if necessary.

Latching Issues for a Late Preterm Infant

Late preterm babies often have uncoordinated suckle, swallow and breathing cycles. Their reflexes for rooting and suckling may be underdeveloped, and they may need time to learn to latch on and breastfeed. Be patient and don’t give up. Breastfeeding has many benefits for you and your baby.

