

A Good Latch: The Key to Successful Breastfeeding

Seventy-five percent of mothers start out breastfeeding, but only about 13 percent of babies are exclusively breastfed at the end of six months, according to the CDC. Though the health benefits of breastfeeding are widely known, trouble with breastfeeding causes many moms to turn to formula after only a few weeks.

One of the most common misconceptions when an infant has problems breastfeeding is that there isn't enough milk, but this is rarely the case. The key to successful breastfeeding is getting the baby to latch on well. A baby who latches on well and feed wells will naturally stimulate milk production. On the other hand, trying to breastfeed a baby with a poor latch is similar to giving a baby a bottle with a hole that is too small—the bottle may be full of milk, but the baby cannot get much or will get it very slowly. When this happens, the baby becomes irritable even after spending long periods of time at the breast, making the mother think her milk supply isn't plentiful enough.

It may take time for your baby to learn how to latch on well, so be patient. Skin-to-skin contact immediately after birth is one of the most helpful ways for a baby to learn how to latch on. Research shows that many babies will latch on and start breastfeeding all by themselves shortly after their first skin-to-skin encounter.

Finding a position that's comfortable for you and your baby is also crucial for securing a good latch. Using a comfortable chair with back support and a good breastfeeding support pillow can help get the baby in a proper latch position.

Once you're in a comfortable position, tummy-to-tummy with your baby, gently brush your finger against his or her upper lip. This should prompt the baby's mouth to gape open. Bring your baby to your breast and aim towards the roof of the mouth for a good latch.

Signs of a good latch are wiggling ears, circular movement of the jaw and rounded cheeks. You should also be able to hear your baby swallowing, not making clicking or smacking noises. A satisfied baby with a good latch will end feeding with signs of satiety, including "falling off" the breast, open hands and falling asleep.

Breastfeeding should not be painful. A poor latch will cause discomfort and soreness.

If you're having trouble, work with a lactation consultant at the hospital and before you leave, confirm that your baby has a good latch.

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