

Fathers and breastfeeding



NCT Information sheet

The first few weeks with a new baby bring a whole range of emotions and changes to new parents' lives. Many women see their partner as their main source of support with breastfeeding. It has been shown that if fathers are supportive of breastfeeding, women are much more likely to continue. This information sheet aims to take an honest look at breastfeeding from a father's viewpoint.

Why is breastfeeding important?

Breastfeeding has many advantages over formula feeding. It is healthier for both mother and baby as well as being natural, free and convenient.

Overall, formula fed babies have:

- a greater risk of sickness and diarrhoea
- more ear infections
- more chest infections
- greater risk of allergies such as asthma and eczema
- more chance of being overweight as children.

Breastfed babies also have better jaw and eye development and are likely to be healthier as children and adults. There are health differences for the mother too. Women who don't breastfeed have a slightly greater chance of breast cancer, some forms of ovarian cancer, and diabetes in later life. Breastfeeding is convenient as you don't have to carry around, sterilise or make up bottles. The greatest benefit occurs if the baby has only breastmilk for the first six months and then carries on breastfeeding while starting on solid foods, particularly if there are allergies in the family.

How long should a mother breastfeed her baby for?

As long as she and her baby want to:

- breastfeeding for three months makes infections less likely for at least a year
- breastmilk is a complete food for the

baby for at least six months

- babies who are breastfed for a year don't need to have formula at all
- breastfed toddlers continue to benefit from breastfeeding.

Can the father really make a difference?

Yes. A woman is more likely to choose to breastfeed if she's sure her partner is positive about it. In addition, a mother who decides to breastfeed is much more likely to have a good experience if her partner supports her decision.

Some common concerns of fathers

"I'm worried I'll feel left out"

With breastfeeding, parents do have different roles to play and it can take a while to get used to this. Fathers may feel jealous or left out, especially as the mother and baby can have a very close relationship. But breastfeeding is only one aspect of caring for your baby. You can still be involved with her in lots of different and rewarding ways, for example by:

- playing
- soothing
- bathing
- changing nappies
- entertaining
- winding
- talking
- taking him for a walk
- laying him on your chest, skin-to-skin
- carrying him in a sling.

Even though your baby probably won't smile for the first 4–6 weeks, from birth she will be interested in looking at things, especially people's faces, and hearing gentle sounds.

"I really want to share the feeding."

Surprisingly, this may be less important than you expect if you are involved with your baby in other ways. But if you are still keen to feed your baby you could give expressed breastmilk. However, it is normally better



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to wait a few weeks, until breastfeeding is going well, before introducing a bottle. The risk of giving bottles before breastfeeding is going well is that the baby could learn to prefer the bottle. If formula milk is used instead, the mother's breasts are likely to become uncomfortably full and take this as a signal to make less breastmilk. See the NCT information sheet on 'Using infant formula'.

If you (and your partner) want your baby to get used to a bottle, you could give one from time to time, after the first few weeks, so that she gets used to the different action of sucking, but there is no clear evidence that this helps.

Once your baby starts solids, you can become more involved with the feeding.

"I feel uncomfortable about my partner breastfeeding in public"

It may help to discuss this with your partner so that you can agree how to handle it. Many men who feel like this before their baby is born change their minds later when they are used to seeing breastfeeding. In reality, there is usually little or no breast showing when the baby is feeding. Many more places welcome breastfeeding now and provide facilities for mothers to feed in private if they prefer. If you know any other men with a breastfed baby it may help to talk to them.

"Will breastfeeding affect our sex life?"

Possibly, but tiredness may affect it more. You may have to plan ahead a bit as:

- A woman's vagina may be drier during breastfeeding so using a lubricating gel can help.
- Any breast stimulation can cause milk to flow so keep a soft towel handy; this is less of a problem if the mother feeds the baby before making love.
- You may even find that your partner is more comfortable with her body as a result of giving birth and breastfeeding and enjoys sex more.

Do fathers need to know much about breastfeeding?

You may find it helpful to know how breastfeeding works and what is normal behaviour for breastfed babies. Here are some useful facts:

- baby will be happier if he's fed as soon as he shows signs of being hungry
- breastfed babies usually feed frequently (at least 2–3 hourly) in the early weeks, especially during the evenings, but every baby is individual
- some babies are slow feeders at first, but they get quicker as they get older

- the more the baby feeds, the more milk the mother makes
- babies are usually less windy, and put on weight better, if they finish feeding from the first breast before being offered the second so that they get plenty of the fat-rich hindmilk
- a mother will enjoy feeding more if she is comfortable and relaxed
- the baby needs to open his mouth really wide, have the nipple in the top part of his mouth and have his chin against his mother's breast to feed well, as he massages the milk out with his tongue
- nipple soreness or pain during feeding is generally a sign that the baby is not getting a large enough mouthful of breast.
- listen and talk honestly about how you each feel about finding your way with your new baby
- be involved with the baby in other ways so that the caring is shared
- help to reduce the household chores your partner has to do so that she can feed the baby for as long and as often as the baby needs
- encourage your partner to eat and drink regularly, so that she feels more able to cope
- get specialist help if there is a difficulty with breastfeeding – practically all women can breastfeed if they get help when it's needed
- if your partner is feeling like stopping early on, while she and the baby are still learning this skill, encourage her to keep going by being positive about the progress so far; restarting breastfeeding after stopping is possible but not easy
- accept her decision on when to stop breastfeeding.

The realities of breastfeeding in the first few weeks

Many parents see breastfeeding as a natural process but for many new parents it is unfamiliar. It takes time for mother and baby to learn to carry out this new skill together well. In reality, many women in the UK experience some problems at first, but it becomes easier.

The experience of supporting a partner who is breastfeeding can be different for different men. Some mothers find breastfeeding a really satisfying experience, while for others it can be difficult and feel restricting. Sometimes a breastfeeding mother can go through a rough patch, but good support, commitment and determination can help her through it. Tiredness is normal with a new baby and it can be especially stressful if the reality is tougher than either of you expected.

Sore or cracked nipples are painful and a mother with this problem may feel very upset because she dreads feeding. However, once her baby learns to latch comfortably her nipples should soon heal. If the baby puts on less weight than expected the mother may worry that she's not producing enough milk. However, if the baby is alert and usually happy when awake, and producing plenty of wet and dirty nappies, there is unlikely to be a problem. When breastfeeding goes well the family feels relaxed and some mothers feel more confident in themselves as a result.

How can fathers help with breastfeeding?

These suggestions have been found to be helpful:

- boost your partner's confidence by encouraging her; like any new skill, reassurance and praise help – if she believes she can breastfeed, she probably will

Help and support

The NCT supports all parents, whatever their decisions about breast or formula feeding. Breastfeeding help is available from breastfeeding counsellors on the NCT Breastfeeding Line, 8am–10pm every day, phone 0300 330 0771. There may also be breastfeeding counsellors who are available locally. Other sources of help:

- Midwives in hospital and visiting your home
- Breastfeeding specialists based in some hospitals
- National Breastfeeding Line (government funded) **0844 209 0920**.

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