Polycystic ovary syndrome and breastfeeding: how practitioners can help

This hormonal condition may cause low milk supply, breastfeeding counsellor Kate Malik found when she delved into the research. But there were ways to support mothers who were affected.

“Not enough milk” is the reason 31% of UK mothers give for stopping breastfeeding. One of the more unusual and intractable reasons for low and very low milk supply may be Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS). PCOS involves disruption of the hormones that affect fertility and breastfeeding and is estimated to affect 5-15% of women of childbearing age.

A determined mother

My own interest in the condition goes back to 2002, soon after I qualified. I supported a new mother, Beth, who, in spite of baby-wearing, taking galactogogues and expressing round the clock, was never able to produce all the milk her daughter needed. She bought a supplemental nursing system (SNS), which she used at every feed until her baby was seven months old.

Beth’s determination made a great impression on me, though at the time I felt helpless and bewildered. She came to see me a few years later, pregnant with her second child and mentioned that she had been diagnosed with PCOS. Lightbulb! Hadn’t I read something about PCOS in The breastfeeding answer book? It was a relief to both of us to have a possible explanation for her low milk supply.

“I was a relief to both the mother and myself to have a possible explanation for her low milk supply.’

PCOS and low milk supply

When I started looking at PCOS for my NCT Level 5 research topic, I started with respected books and internet sources, including the University of Worcester’s online library, Swetswise and the NCT library. These suggested that PCOS could result in low milk supply in some mothers. However, I was surprised at how few high-quality studies I found specifically on PCOS and breastfeeding. Research suggests that a minority of women with PCOS have underdeveloped glandular tissue in their breasts. This seems to reduce milk supply and the usual methods of stimulation do not seem to work.

In 2008, a matched, prospective cohort study in Norway found that 14% fewer mothers with PCOS were exclusively breastfeeding at one month compared to those without PCOS (75% vs 89%). However, the mothers with PCOS were just as likely as the other mothers to be breastfeeding at three and six months, suggesting that if breastfeeding is established, continuation is not affected. There was also some suggestion in the literature that PCOS could be linked with over-supply. However, this comes from an informal poll which keeps being reported as fact.

I now feel more confident about supporting mothers with PCOS. At the end of a recent antenatal session a mother with the condition approached me, having read about links with low milk supply. I listened and acknowledged her anxiety, then shared the reliable information I had and reminded her of what we’d explored about establishing breastfeeding. I felt her relax and she left the session smiling. A few weeks later, she contacted me to say that all was going well.

Tips for supporting mothers with PCOS

- Listen.
- Discuss what reliable evidence there is, while being aware that the mother’s confidence may be low.
- Share information about giving breastfeeding the best chance, including keeping baby close, responding to cues, avoiding supplements unless medically indicated.
- Support mothers who feel they have a low supply by signposting to sources of evidence-based information, such as NCT information sheets, and the website kellymom.com, with the proviso that the usual galactogogues may not be effective.
- Acknowledge a mother’s feeling of loss if she is unable to breastfeed fully and offer suggestions for maintaining a close physical relationship with her baby, including remaining the primary person who feeds her baby, skin-to-skin contact during and between feeds, baby-wearing, offering her breast for comfort, feeding at her breast using an supplemental nursing system or Lact-aid.

Tips on desk research or secondary analysis

If you are researching a topic, please contact information@nct.org.uk and our librarians will help you search systematically.

References