

Feeding your baby in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit

Information to help with decisions

Parents have many questions about feeding their babies while in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU). Health Care Providers will give you information from current studies to help you make decisions on how to feed your baby while in the NICU.

Many parents want to breastfeed / chestfeed during their baby's stay in the NICU but due to personal or medical reasons, some parents might need to give extra milk with either the parent's own milk, a donor's milk (where available) or infant formula. Usually your own milk is best for your baby, especially during their stay on the unit.

How does my baby benefit from my milk?

Studies show that babies who receive breast milk have more **protection from:**

- diarrhea and vomiting
- colds, flus, ear infections, chest infections
- diabetes, obesity, heart disease and stroke
- some childhood cancers
- bowel conditions
- Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS)

Parents who breastfeed / chestfeed their babies, or provide the milk by expressing and pumping, have increased protection against:

- diabetes
- bleeding problems after delivery
- breast cancer before menopause
- ovarian cancer

Why is breast milk important for premature or sick babies?

Studies tell us that the first milk, called colostrum, is very important for premature babies. It has shown to reduce the risk of necrotizing enterocolitis (NEC), a serious bowel condition that can affect babies born prematurely. Even very small amounts of colostrum and breast / chest milk help these babies grow and protect them from NEC and other infections.

How can I give my baby my milk if they cannot breastfeed / chestfeed?

Many premature babies are not able to directly breastfeed / chestfeed but they can still receive your milk. You can do this by doing hand expressions. Your milk is the best way to provide your baby the nutrition they need from the start. You can use a pump from the unit if your baby needs to stay longer.

A community or hospital nurse, or a Lactation Consultant can help you learn how to express, pump, and later latch your baby when your baby is ready to feed. To establish a good milk supply, it is important to express or pump the same amount of times as your baby would feed. This is usually 8 or more times in 24 hours.

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Oral Immune Therapy

Oral immune therapy is when we give babies small amounts of their parent's milk by mouth. While on the unit, your baby receives it between the cheek and gums from a syringe or cotton swab every 2 to 4 hours. Start hand expressing even if you and your baby are not able to breast/chest feed. This will help to make and remove breast milk.

Studies show that oral immune therapy:

- lessens the chances of infection
- supports better weight gain
- helps increase milk supply
- provides immune protection
- reduces the pain of certain procedures
- can help babies start to feed sooner

Pasteurized Donor Human Milk

There are some times when a parent might not have enough milk or their baby is too young to have formula. The baby's health care team will ask the parent if they consent to giving the baby Pasteurized Donor Human Milk. Donor milk provides many of the benefits found in the parents' own milk. We give this milk to babies until the parents' own milk is enough for their baby.

Skin to Skin Reminder: Be sure to spend time skin to skin with your baby every day. Check our skin to skin resources for more information.

Where can I find more information?

For information about pregnancy and parenting, visit:



fraserhealth.ca/pregnancy



healthlinkbc.ca/pregnancy-parenting

For information about formula feeding, visit healthlinkbc.ca,
Select *Healthy Eating & Physical Activity, Age and Stage*, then *Infants, Children and Youth*.



[Formula Feeding Your Baby: Getting Started](#)



[Formula Feeding Your Baby: Safely Preparing and Storing Formula](#)

For information about skin to skin care in the neonatal intensive care unit, visit:



perinatalservicesbc.ca

Search *kangaroo care information for parents*



patienteduc.fraserhealth.ca

Search *skin to skin neonatal*

For more patient education resources, visit patienteduc.fraserhealth.ca, then search:



[breastfeeding your newborn](#)



[expressing breast milk](#)



[bottle feeding baby](#)

For more information, ask your nurse for:

- Breast Milk Expression Log
- Fraser Health Pump Rental List