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Wolters Kluwer

Patient education: Breastfeeding (The Basics)

[Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate](#)

Do doctors recommend breastfeeding for most babies?

Yes. Doctors recommend breastfeeding your baby for at least 1 year (12 months) if possible. For the first 6 months, breast milk is the only food a baby needs. Most babies start eating other foods, in addition to breast milk, when they are 4 to 6 months old.

Breastfeeding has many benefits for both you and your baby. This is true even if you breastfeed for only a short time.

When can I start breastfeeding?

Most women can start breastfeeding in the delivery room. It's best to start breastfeeding as soon as possible after giving birth, ideally within the first hour. "Skin-to-skin contact" can help your baby learn to breastfeed.

For the first few days, most women make only a small amount of yellowish milk called "colostrum." Colostrum has all of the nutrition a newborn needs. You will start making more milk after 2 or 3 days.

How should I hold my baby during breastfeeding?

There are different ways you can hold your baby during breastfeeding ([figure 1](#)). You can try different positions to figure out which way works best for you and your baby.

What does "latch-on" mean?

Latch-on is another word for when a baby makes a tight seal with his or her mouth around the nipple and the areola (the dark skin around the nipple) ([figure 2](#)). A good latch-on helps the baby get enough milk and can prevent the mother's nipples from getting hurt. But even with a good latch-on, it can be normal for women to feel a little pain when a feeding starts.

How often should I breastfeed and how long should a feeding last?

A woman should breastfeed when her baby shows signs of being hungry. A baby can show that he or she is hungry by:

- Waking up from sleep
- Moving the head around as if he or she is looking for the breast
- Sucking on his or her hands, lips, or tongue

Babies can breastfeed on different schedules and for different amounts of time. For example, some babies finish a feeding in 5 minutes, but others might take 20 minutes or longer.

Doctors recommend letting the baby finish breastfeeding on one side so that he or she gets all the milk from that breast. Then, you can see if your baby wants to drink from the other breast. The next time you breastfeed, try to remember which breast your baby started on the last time, and start on the other side. Switching the side you start with each time will help both your breasts continue to make milk.

How do I know if my baby is getting enough breast milk?

You can tell if your baby is getting enough breast milk by:

- Checking his or her diapers – By day 4 or 5 after birth, babies should have at least 6 wet diapers a day.
- Checking his or her bowel movements – By day 4 after birth, babies should have 4 or more bowel movements a day. By day 5, their bowel movements should be yellow.
- Having your doctor or nurse check to see if your baby is gaining weight

Does my baby need any other food or drink?

For the first 6 months, most babies need only breast milk. Babies who are breastfed also need to take extra vitamin D. This comes as a liquid that you give your baby using a dropper. Your baby's doctor can talk to you about how to do this and how much vitamin D to give.

When a baby is between 4 and 6 months old, he or she can start eating and drinking other things, too. Ask your doctor or nurse which foods you can feed your baby and when. You can still continue to breastfeed after your baby starts solid foods.

What problems can happen during breastfeeding?

Some women have problems during breastfeeding that can include:

- Swollen, hard, and painful breasts
 - Painful or cracked nipples
 - Breast or nipple infections
 - Blocked milk ducts, which can cause red and painful breast lumps
-

How are breastfeeding problems treated?

Breastfeeding problems are treated in different ways. Treatment will depend on the problem. For example, women with swollen, hard, and painful breasts often feel better if they:

- Use their hand or a breast pump to let some milk out ([figure 3](#))
- Use an ice pack or take pain-relieving medicine to treat the pain
- Take a warm shower to start their milk flow and let some milk out

Talk with your doctor or nurse if you are having problems with breastfeeding. Almost all breastfeeding problems can be treated. Some women also find it helpful to talk with a breastfeeding expert called a "lactation consultant."

Should I see a doctor or nurse?

Call your doctor or nurse if you have:

- A blocked milk duct that does not get better
 - A fever and a hard, red, and swollen area of the breast
 - Blood leaking from the nipples
 - Pain that lasts for the whole breastfeeding session
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Do I need to change how I eat or drink when I am breastfeeding?

Maybe. You should eat a healthy diet and drink plenty of liquids. If you are trying to lose weight, breastfeeding might help. If you want to drink alcohol, most doctors recommend having only an occasional drink that has the amount of alcohol found in 1 glass of wine. They also recommend waiting 2 hours after having a drink before you breastfeed.

Can I keep taking my medicines while I am breastfeeding?

Some medicines are not safe to take while you are breastfeeding. But in most cases, it's possible to keep taking the medicines you need, or switch to different medicines. If you take any medicines,

let your doctor or nurse know. He or she can make sure that those medicines are safe to take when breastfeeding.

Illegal drugs are harmful for a breastfeeding baby. Marijuana (along with other forms of cannabis) is legal in some places, but should be avoided if you are breastfeeding. There are studies that suggest it could cause problems in babies.

When should I stop breastfeeding?

If possible, it is a good idea to keep breastfeeding until your baby is about 1 year old. But women choose to stop breastfeeding at different times and for different reasons.

When you do decide to stop, doctors recommend doing it gradually. You can drop one feeding every 2 to 5 days, or breastfeed for a shorter time each feeding. This will make it easier for your body to adjust. It will also give your baby time to get used to breastfeeding less.

More on this topic

[Patient education: Deciding to breastfeed \(The Basics\)](#)

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[Patient education: Common breastfeeding problems \(The Basics\)](#)

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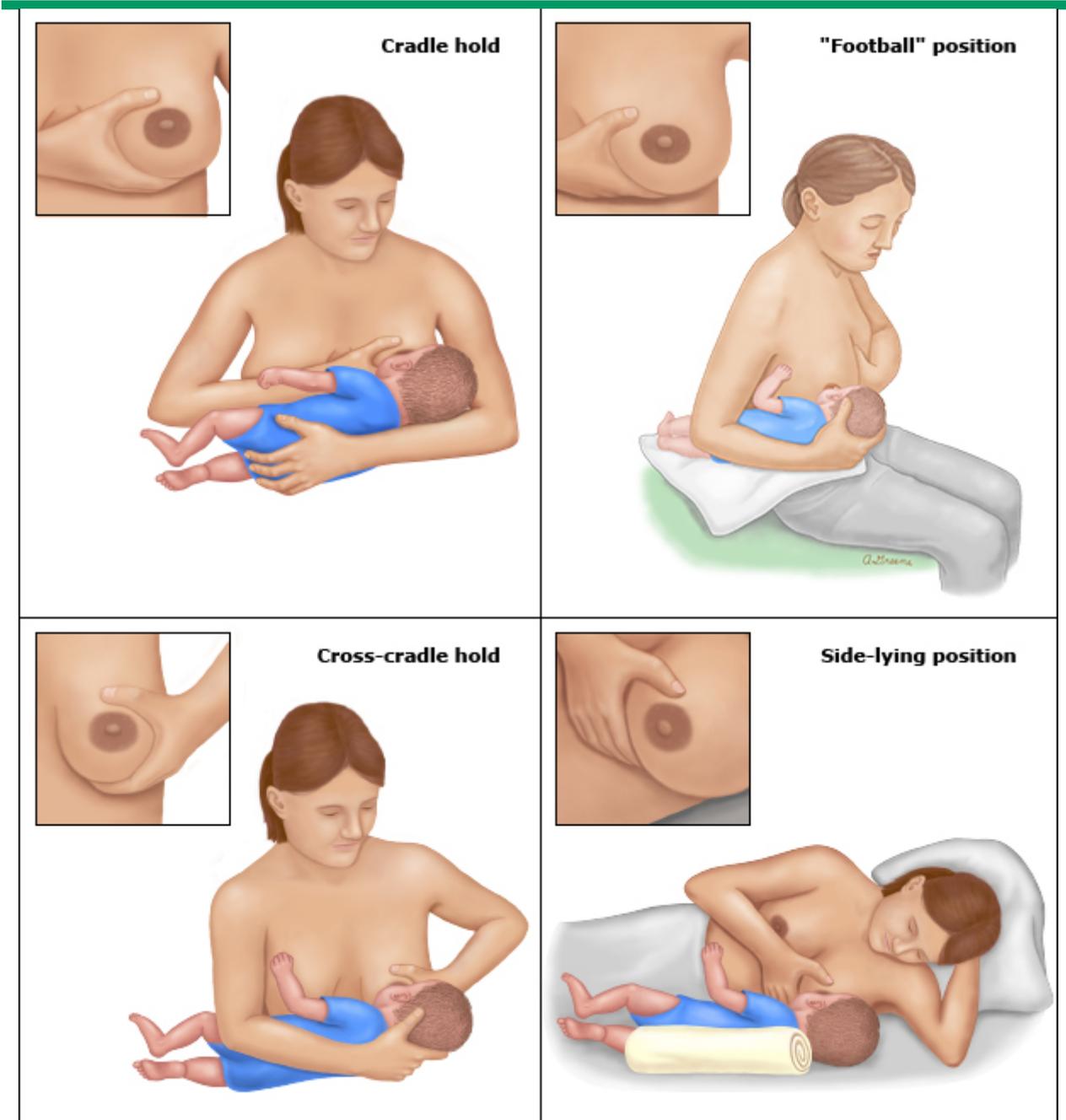
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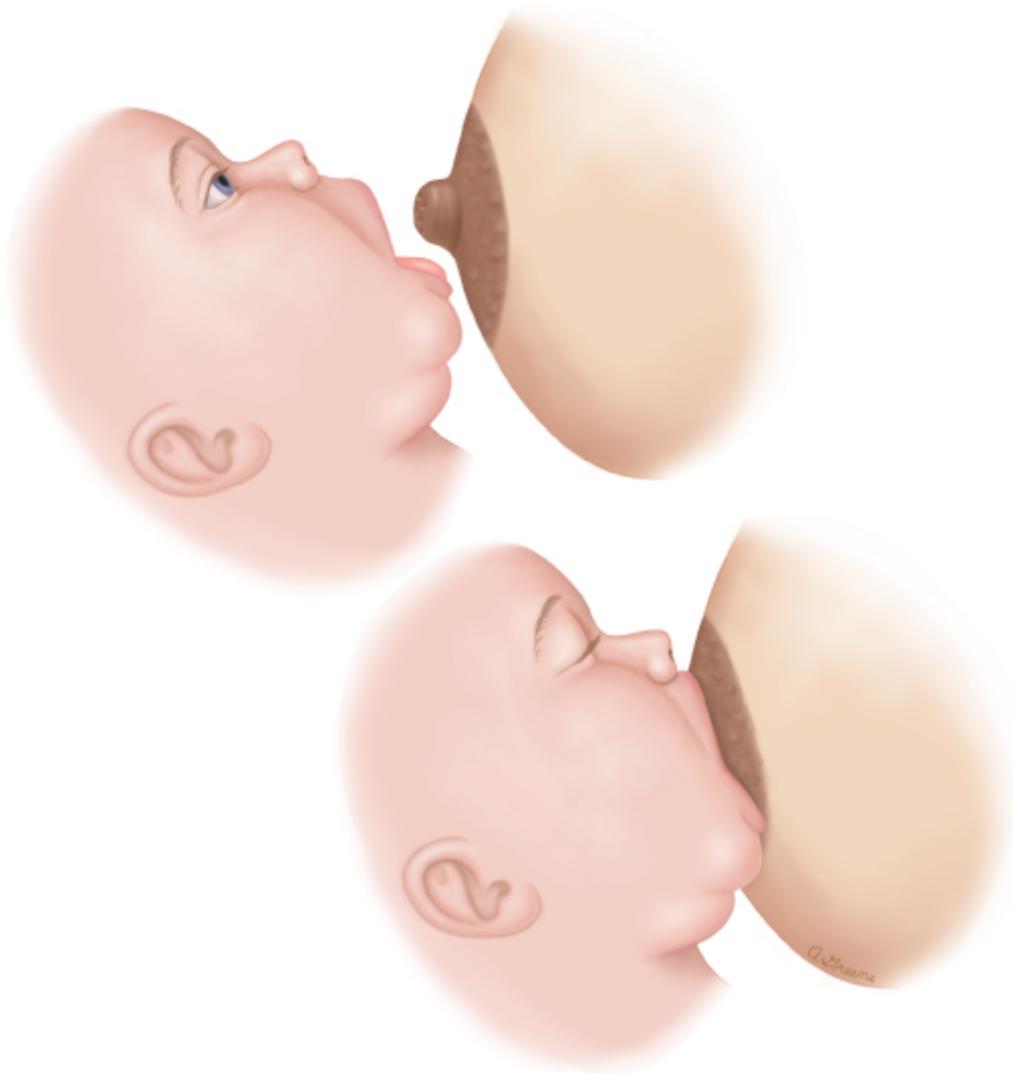
Topic 15451 Version 9.0

GRAPHICS**Different holds for breastfeeding**

These drawings show different ways you can hold your baby for breastfeeding.

Graphic 60405 Version 6.0

Latch-on

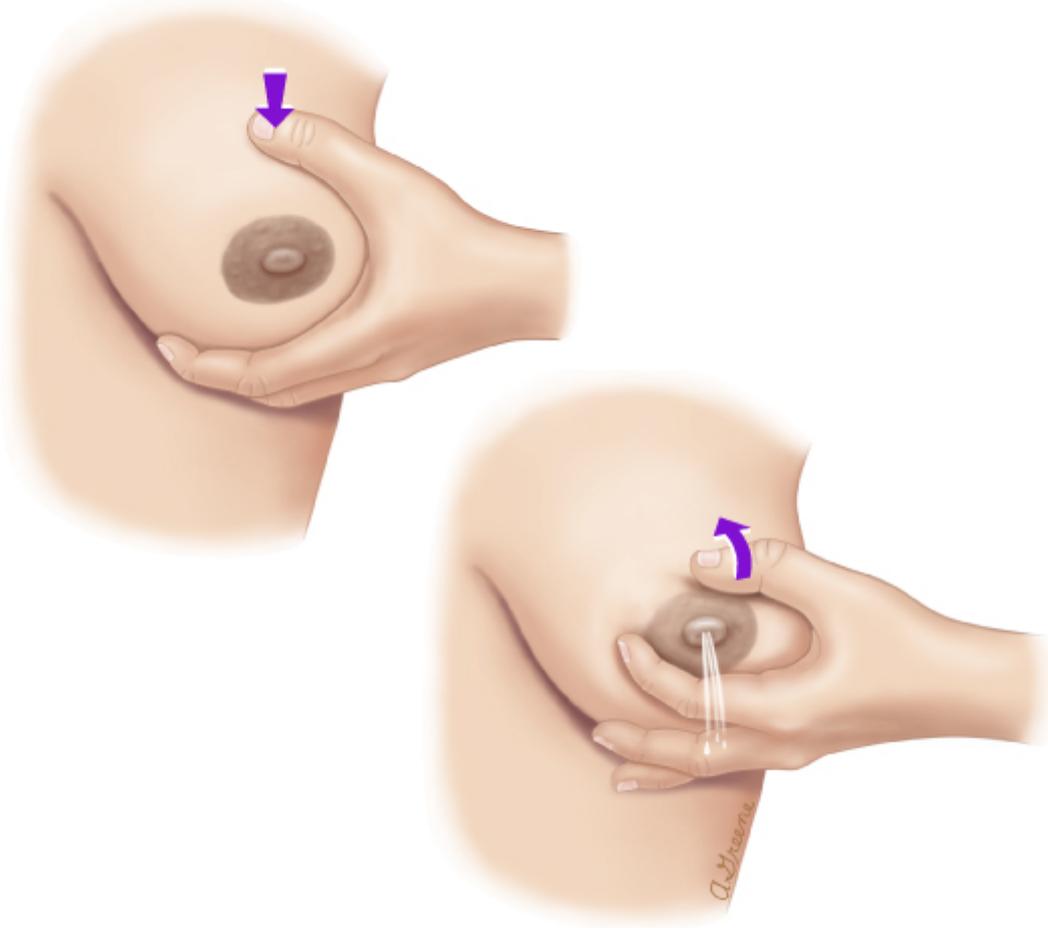


During latch-on, a baby's mouth forms a tight seal around the nipple and most of the areola (the dark skin around the nipple). Signs that your baby has a good latch-on include:

- The top and bottom lips are wide open.
- The lower lip is turned outward against the breast.
- The chin is touching the breast, and the nose is close to the breast.
- The cheeks are full.
- The tongue comes out over the lower lip during latch-on and stays below the areola during nursing.

Graphic 69241 Version 8.0

Hand expression to release breast milk



Hold your hand in a c-shape, with your thumb on top. Press your thumb gently on your breast straight back into the chest. Then, roll your thumb and fingers toward the nipple. Breast milk should come out of the nipple. Keep doing this as you move your hand around the whole breast.

Graphic 73810 Version 5.0