

# You and your baby

Supporting love and nurture  
on the neonatal unit



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The  
**Baby Friendly  
Initiative**  
For all babies

**unicef**   
UNITED KINGDOM

**"I was so scared that she would be too tiny to survive, as I had never seen a premature baby before."**



When your baby is born too early it can stir up all kinds of emotions. Many parents describe the experience as living in a fog where everything is strange and scary. You may feel as if you have handed over the care of your baby to complete strangers. These feelings are a normal part of coming to terms with this major event, so be gentle with yourself as you begin to adjust to life as the parent of a sick or premature baby.

## For your baby, you matter most

Although your baby is in need of medical and nursing care, you are a crucial part of their life. When your baby was growing inside you they got to know your voice and the voices of all their close family, so talking to your baby will calm and reassure them. Knowing you are close and hearing your voice will release a hormone called oxytocin, which is important for your baby's brain development.

**Your milk protects me from infections. Even if I'm not ready to feed I love to taste small amounts, which also help keep my mouth clean.**



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## Feeding and protecting your baby

One of the best things you (and only you) can do for your baby at this time is to provide your breastmilk. Your breastmilk will not only provide the nutrition to help your baby grow but also provide antibodies to protect them from infection while they are in hospital and for years to come. This protection is especially important for premature babies.

Your breastmilk is unique for your baby. The earlier you start to express and the more often you express, the more milk you will produce for your baby's growing needs. Ask your midwife or neonatal nurse to help you start.



If your baby was born very early you may need to carry on expressing for many weeks and at times this can feel relentless. Double pumping will save time and increase your milk supply. Your nurse and the midwives will help you do this. If you have set up a good supply in the first couple of weeks you can then be a bit more flexible about when and how much you express. It should not affect your milk if you do less than eight expressions in 24 hours on the odd day to give yourself a break.

## Key points

1. Start expressing within a couple of hours after giving birth, even if your baby will only take tiny amounts of milk.
2. Aim to express 8–10 times in 24 hours particularly in the first couple of weeks.
3. With each day, the amount of milk you express should increase.
4. Even if your baby is taking tiny amounts now, they will need more as they get bigger.
5. Ask your nurse or midwife to check your expressing technique.

You will have good and bad days along this journey. The following tips can help boost your milk making hormones.

- Ask the nurse or midwife to check that you are using the best technique if hand expressing or that pump equipment including funnel size is working for you.
- Stay close to your baby when expressing, or have a picture of your baby or a piece of their clothing nearby.
- If you can, get someone to give you a nice back rub before your express.
- Close your eyes and imagine gently kissing your baby from their toes up to the top of their head.
- Have a big glass of water before you go to bed so you will need to get up to go to the toilet in the night to fit in a night time expression.
- Express in clusters (two to three times close together) to give you a bit of space. However don't leave it longer than five hours between expressions.
- If your milk supply suddenly drops, don't panic as it hasn't gone away! Spending time in skin to skin contact with your baby, massaging your breasts or doing something you enjoy will help you relax and your milk will start to flow again.

**For more information on expressing go to**  
**[unicef.org.uk/babyfriendly/resources/audiovideo/hand-expression](https://www.unicef.org.uk/babyfriendly/resources/audiovideo/hand-expression)**

## Skin to skin contact and kangaroo care

**“ Her heart rate and breathing just seemed to settle and my husband said, ‘she only does that when she’s on you.’”**

As soon as your baby is stable, they (and you) will really benefit from spending time in skin to skin contact. This is a very special time for you both and it helps to steady your baby’s heart rate and breathing and keeps them snug and warm. Skin to skin contact also helps babies grow and reduces their stress levels, and is the perfect way to soothe and calm them after a medical procedure. Skin to skin contact can also calm you, which can help if you have had a busy or stressful time getting to the hospital. Spending lots of time in skin to skin contact with your baby has been shown to shorten hospital stays.



**Hold me in skin to skin contact – this will help you make more milk for me.**

## Helping your baby's development

Talking, reading or even singing quietly to your baby will soothe and reassure them.

When holding your baby, look into their eyes: even if your baby can only look back for a short while they will love this special contact. You can also calm your baby by making sure that there are no bright lights or loud noises in their space. You can also provide gentle touch. The nurses will show you something called **containment holding**, which will help your baby feel safe and comforted. Even if your baby is very tiny they will love to look into your eyes when you hold them.

I love to hear your voice as it makes me feel calm and safe, but please speak softly as loud noises can be scary.



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Your baby has a strong sense of smell and your smell in particular is very familiar to them. Keeping a piece of muslin inside your bra and then putting that in the incubator provides comfort for your baby when you are not with them. Having something that smells of your baby is also very comforting for you and helps keep them in your mind.



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## Getting involved

The earlier you can start with everyday cares for your baby, such as washing and changing nappies, the more confident you will become. Take your time and talk to your baby throughout, telling them exactly what you are doing as this will reassure them.

As you spend more time with your baby, you will begin to really get to know them, learn how to comfort them and pick up on how they are feeling. Trust your instincts and let the nurses know if you notice anything that you are concerned about, as you know your baby better than anyone else.

**Remember, you can call the unit anytime when you are not able to be with your baby.**

**When I am tired and need time out, I let you know by yawning, hiccuping, turning away or putting my hands up to my face.**



## Moving on to breastfeeding

After all your effort expressing, it can be the perfect reward when your baby begins to feed directly from you.

From around 32–34 weeks your baby will begin to manage sucking, swallowing and breathing at the same time. However you can begin to practise how to hold your baby for feeding long before they are able to fully breastfeed.

Holding your baby in skin to skin contact will help you notice early feeding cues (opening their mouth, poking their tongue out, turning toward your breast). Letting them lick and nuzzle at your breast (after you have expressed) is a good way of helping your baby get to know the shape of your breast and smell of your milk.

Even after your baby has had a first breastfeed, it can still take time for them to be fully breastfeeding, so it is best to take each day or even each feed at a time.

**Be patient with me as I may take a while to learn. Every day I will get stronger with your milk and together we will get there.**



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## Helping your baby to breastfeed

- Try to get as comfy as possible.
- Hold your baby close (skin to skin contact is perfect) and calm and reassure them by talking gently.
- Make sure baby's nose and toes are facing the same way so they don't have to twist their head to feed.
- Gently support baby's head, making sure they can still move their head forward and backward.
- Express a little milk on to your nipple and let baby lick this.
- Encourage baby to open their mouth by gently rubbing your nipple above their top lip.
- When their mouth is wide open, bring baby closer so that your nipple reaches back into their mouth.
- You will feel a drawing sensation as baby begins to feed but it should not be painful.
- Look and listen to your baby and notice if they are swallowing as this will tell you that they are getting your milk.
- If your baby doesn't seem comfortable, try changing the way you hold them. Ask the nurses to help you find a position that suits you both.

## Taking your baby home

Although you have longed to take your baby home since the day they were born, it is normal to feel anxious and a little scared about caring for your baby without the support of the doctors and nurses.

Talk to the nurses about any fears you may have and how you can feel more confident back at home. The unit may be able to provide a room for you all to stay for a couple of nights so you can take care of your baby by yourself but with nurses nearby.

If you are breastfeeding it can sometimes be tempting to give your baby bottles to help you get home quicker, but you just need a few days and a little patience. Breastfeeding will really help protect your baby from infections, which will prevent them being re-admitted to hospital.

It may be that you need to continue expressing after your baby feeds for a while to keep your milk supply going. If your baby is still having some feeds of expressed breastmilk when you go home, you can gradually increase the number of breastfeeds as your baby grows stronger. Make sure you have contact details for places you can go to get ongoing help with breastfeeding when you are at home.





Everything in the hospital will have been very regimented, including feeding and caring for your baby, but now you can begin to meet their needs in a more responsive way. You will already know your baby very well and be tuned into their likes and dislikes. Sometimes they may want to feed or have a cuddle outside of their regime and this is fine.

As long as your baby is well and alert you can offer them a breastfeed anytime they want. On average your baby will feed at least 8–10 times in 24 hours but they may also snack and have a comfort feed in between. Think of feed and cuddle time as an opportunity for you to sit down, rest and make up for the times you were not able to cuddle them in the neonatal unit.

## Visitors

Family and friends will be very excited when you take your baby home and lots of people may want to come and meet baby. This can be tiring for you as you adjust to being a new family, so if you feel tired, don't be afraid to say so – people won't mind.

It's okay to ask people not to come over if they have a cough or cold and to wash their hands if they are going to touch baby. It is still best to keep your baby close to you rather than have them passed around visitors as this will help them feel safe and protect them from infection.

**I can't wait to come home. It will feel a bit strange at first so keep me close to you.**





## Useful contacts

If you need help with breastfeeding or expressing milk you can talk to the staff in the neonatal unit, your midwife or health visitor or talk to a breastfeeding counsellor on one of these helpline numbers;

- National Breastfeeding Helpline **0300 100 0212** (9.30am-9.30pm)
- La Leche League **0845 120 2918** (24 hours)
- Breastfeeding Network **0300 100 0210**
- National Childbirth Trust **0300 330 0771** (8.00am-12.00 midnight)

Tiny Life is a premature baby charity which provides a breast pump loan service for Northern Ireland mothers of ill or premature babies, they can be contacted on **028 9081 5050**, further details can be found at **[www.tinylife.org.uk](http://www.tinylife.org.uk)**

If you wish to donate extra breastmilk contact Ann McCrea, Human Milk Bank Coordinator, WHSCT Human Milk Bank on **028 6862 8333**.

A list of breastfeeding support groups in Northern Ireland can be found at **[www.breastfedbabies.org/support-groups](http://www.breastfedbabies.org/support-groups)**



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**Baby Friendly  
Initiative**  
For all babies



## Contact us

**WEB:** [unicef.org.uk/babyfriendly](http://unicef.org.uk/babyfriendly)

**EMAIL:** [bfi@unicef.org.uk](mailto:bfi@unicef.org.uk)

**TEL:** 020 7375 6144/6052

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