

The first few weeks, part two: the breastfeeding mom

For new moms who choose to breastfeed, Heather Ludwig likens it to learning how to drive a car. If you can get behind the wheel, you can learn to breastfeed. It won't be easy. It can even be scary. But if you lean on experts for help, you can master it.

For a first-time breastfeeding mom, there are things to look out for to make sure feeding is smooth sailing.

- **Feeding cues:** Ludwig, an international board-certified lactation consultant at OSF HealthCare, says babies will wiggle their head and smack their lips when they want to come to breast.

"If you wait too long and miss those early cues, they move from hungry to hangry," Ludwig chuckles. "They're crying and upset. You have to calm them down before you can feed them."

- **Feeding schedule:** Ludwig says it's normal for newborns to settle into a cluster feeding schedule. That means they want to nurse on and off frequently in a short period of time. You should get to know your baby's wants and always respond when they want to be held or brought to breast. This will help develop a feeding schedule. You can talk to a lactation consultant if you have questions.
- **Breast care:** Ludwig says years ago, pregnant women were told to run a washcloth across their nipples to toughen the surface and prepare for breastfeeding. But experts found that to be "horrible" advice, she says, because your body is doing all the preparation. Your breasts have natural lubrication.

Instead, during and after pregnancy, wash your breasts normally. But if your nipples are abnormally dry, Ludwig says to use breastfeeding nipple balm or just let your breast milk dry on the skin.

Ludwig adds that during breastfeeding, your nipples may feel sensitive and slightly tender. But if they feel very sore and painful (for example, if your bra rubbing against the nipple causes pain), talk to a lactation consultant.

"First, I'm going to see when the baby latches, are we getting a nice, big wide mouth?" Ludwig asks. "Then, how can we help with comfort? Lanolin, coconut oil, olive oil and nipple butter are perfectly safe for the baby. We have hydrogels you can put over the skin that will help your body's natural healing processes.

"The last thing is air flow," she says. "Don't always be wrapped up tight in your bra."

- **Milk changes:** In the first few days, your milk will be thick, sticky and more like honey. This is called colostrum. It helps your baby learn to eat and coats their entire gastrointestinal tract with an immune barrier. Then, the milk will become more fluid, and you will produce more of it.

Some women experience a pinch or twinge sensation, called let down, when the baby starts eating. Your breasts may also be lumpy or warm or you may feel emotional due to hormone changes. All normal, Ludwig says.

- **Holding your baby:** Keep your baby close, at breast level and with their head facing the breast. In other words, they should not be looking up and have to turn their head to latch.

Ludwig says you can cradle the baby across your body and support the neck with your hand. Or hold the baby under your arm like you're holding a football. Put some pillows underneath your arms for support. She adds that the child should also be undressed down to the diaper.

"Think of Sunday morning," as an adult, Ludwig says. "You don't want to get out of bed when you're nice and cozy under the covers. You're going to sit there and let your tummy growl. A baby, if they're too warm, won't always get a good meal."

- **Feeding:** Listen for swallowing noises to know your baby is getting milk. And just like adults, Ludwig says the child will be active to start, then slow down as their stomach fills up. You can tickle the baby's cheek or back to keep them awake.

- Ending the session: Ludwig says most babies will relax and fall off the breast on their own when they're full. But if there are signs the session is over and the newborn is still latched, gently put a clean finger into the corner of their mouth. The air will break the suction and let the nipple slide out. If you try to pull the baby off, it will hurt, Ludwig warns.

"Let the baby tell us when they're done. Don't switch [breasts] at a certain time," Ludwig advises.

- Mom's diet: Ludwig says there are diet recommendations during pregnancy. Then when the baby comes out, moms ask "What do I eat now to produce good breast milk?"

Ludwig's answer: there is no specific diet for a breastfeeding mom other than general good choices. Eat a variety of food. Incorporate fruits and vegetables. You may find your appetite is off in the early days. So, Ludwig says you can have a snack nearby, like grapes or crackers, to munch on while breastfeeding. And stay hydrated. Ludwig says you'll probably be thirsty. So, keep water nearby during feeding, too.

Learn more

Read more about how to care for your newborn on the [OSF HealthCare website](#).