

BABY'S FIRST FEED:

HOW A BABY CAN INITIATE BREASTFEEDING

A healthy newborn baby who is kept in skin to skin contact with the mother from birth will begin to seek her breast, usually within minutes of birth. Experts have advised that early initiation can prevent 22% of all deaths among babies below one month of age in developing countries. Early initiation of breastfeeding also protects the health of Australian babies.

Newborn babies, whether they are born naturally or with medical assistance, have natural instincts that enable them to move towards the breast and begin breastfeeding soon after birth. This process is known as the 'Breast Crawl'. A video of the 'Breast Crawl', and further explanation can be accessed at <http://breastcrawl.org/video.htm>.

When a society acts to protect, promote and support natural processes in birth and breastfeeding, there are both short- and long-term health benefits to the mother and baby.

The Baby Friendly Health Initiative (BFHI), which was developed in response to overwhelming scientific evidence supporting breastfeeding, recommends initiating breastfeeding within half an hour of birth. The recommended global 'gold standard' for all babies is exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months, and continued breastfeeding while adding suitably prepared other foods to the baby's diet until the age of two years and beyond.

Some mothers and babies experience difficulties in establishing breastfeeding.

Although breastfeeding is natural, many new mothers and their babies experience difficulties, and a large number of babies are weaned early.

The mother-baby pair who are experiencing early difficulties can be supported by a skilled guide who the mother trusts, such as a breastfeeding counsellor, lactation consultant, midwife, nurse and/or doctor with expertise in breastfeeding. Mothers who receive peer and family support during this time may be encouraged to persevere through the difficulties, and develop confidence in breastfeeding.

Mothers are encouraged to have their babies sleep near them ('rooming-in'), and to feed them whenever the baby is interested ('on demand') while they are establishing breastfeeding.

Babies who receive breastmilk or other food from bottles, or who are given dummies, before they have learnt to feed effectively from their mother's breast may find breastfeeding difficult.

Mothers whose babies are separated from them in the early hours and days after birth may experience difficulties in establishing bonding and breastfeeding. Mothers and babies who have been separated can benefit from skin to skin contact as soon as they are able to be together.

A few of the wonderful intuitive features of the 'Breast Crawl' are:

After the baby has started breathing well, and is skin to skin on the mother's abdomen:

- baby is alert and responsive
- baby's senses of smell and sight guide her/him towards mother's nipple
- baby starts salivating, and making licking and rooting movements with her /his tongue and mouth
- baby's kicking movements on mother's abdomen assist in expulsion of the placenta
- touch of baby's mouth and hand stimulate the nipple to make it protract
- baby can lift her/his head to look at the breast and at mother's face
- baby's mouth opens wide to take in the nipple and surrounding areola and begin suckling effectively.

The natural and early initiation of breastfeeding that occurs with skin to skin contact also protects the baby in the transfer of healthy bacteria from mother to baby's skin and digestive system.

Source: UNICEF India 2007, from breastcrawl.org

Newborn babies who have been exposed to narcotic drugs such as Pethidine may require special support in order to achieve effective breastfeeding.

Marketing of products such as feeding bottles and teats, and product promotion by manufacturers of artificial milks, can undermine a mother's reliance on her own valuable natural resource, breastfeeding.

References:

'Breast Crawl': <http://breastcrawl.org/video.htm>

For more information on the Baby Friendly Health Initiative in Australia, go to <http://www.acmi.org.au/>

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