

Improved Health Outcomes For Preterm Babies Who Are Breastfed



Giving birth to a baby prematurely usually comes as a bit of a shock. Not only do you have to come to terms with any medical issues your baby may have, but also the disappointment at not having the birth and immediate bonding experience you might have longed for.

Thoughts of breastfeeding can go out the window, at least initially. However with the appropriate support from medical staff, it is possible for premature babies to be breastfed, and doing so is proven to have many benefits.

Better outcomes

A recent study conducted in the United States at Brigham and Women's Hospital has indicated that **breast milk provided to preterm babies** within the first 28 days of birth resulted in stronger cognitive function, and therefore better IQs, academic achievements, memory, and motor function by age 7.

Previous research has also indicated that **breastmilk can significantly reduce the likelihood of preterm babies contracting a condition called necrotizing enterocolitis (NEC)**, which is relatively



common in preterm babies. This disease damages the intestine, and can lead to death or long term bowel complications.

Preterm breast milk is special

A woman's body and the breast milk she produces is very clever. When a baby is born early, the subsequent breast milk that the mother produces tends to contain extra protein, fat, and nutrition, in order to help a tiny, struggling baby grow and finish developing.

Breast milk in general also contains immunoglobulins. These immunoglobulins help to boost the baby's immune system and protects them from infection. **After a premature birth your breast milk automatically has a higher concentration of immunoglobulins** than it would normally have, had your baby been full term. Nature at its finest!

Skin-to-skin contact can heal

Skin-to-skin contact, or 'kangaroo care' has very real benefits, both physically and mentally, for mother and baby. As soon as it is medically possible, skin-to-skin should be encouraged.

This helps with bonding between mum and baby, assists baby to stay warm and begin to regulate their own body temperature, and allows baby to attempt to latch on and breastfeed. It also helps mother and baby emotionally and mentally, by keeping them both calm, relaxed, and connected.

How to make it happen

Establishing **breastfeeding with a premature infant** is not always an easy task, particularly if your baby is hooked up to machines and reliant on spending much of his/her time in a humidicrib. However there are things you can do to **encourage breastfeeding**.

Firstly, express your colostrum as early as possible after the birth, and continue doing so every couple of hours. This can usually then be fed to your baby via a tube or syringe. The more colostrum your baby receives, the stronger they will get and the more protected they will be. Plus the more expressing you do, the more you stimulate your milk production.



If you can, ask for skin-to-skin contact as much as possible, as this will help stimulate your milk to come in. Keep expressing as often as you can, either by hand or with a hospital grade pump. It may take a few extra days for your milk to come through, so make sure you get as much help and advice from midwives and lactation consultants to keep things moving and to encourage you.

Once your baby is strong enough, you may be able to offer the breast and give breastfeeding a go. Always take the advice of medical staff and get their assistance, particularly for those first attempts. Practice makes perfect, so keep persisting to let your baby (and yourself) get the hang of things. If however your baby struggles, you can still keep providing him/her with expressed milk to ensure they get the benefits of your breast milk.

And whilst you are going through this often grueling process of expressing and attempting to establish breastfeeding with your preterm baby, having the appropriate clothing to wear can make life that little bit easier. So for one less thing to worry about, check out [Peachymama's hospital essentials](#) for feeding and expressing comfort.