

Breastfeeding Support While You or Your Baby Are Hospitalised or Unwell



English

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The World Health Organisation recommend exclusive breastfeeding until around six months of age, the slow introduction of family foods from around six months and continued breastfeeding until the age of two years and beyond. Although breastfeeding reduces your child's risk of illness, you or your baby or young child may be hospitalised or unwell while you are breastfeeding. This can be a very stressful time for you and your family. It is important to let your doctor and hospital staff know you are breastfeeding so effective support can be given.

If you are hospitalised and/or are unwell

- If you are feeling unwell, make sure you have adequate fluid and food intake and rest. Ask for help from family members and friends.
- In nearly all circumstances, even if you are contagious with a cold, flu or gastrointestinal upset it is safe for you to breastfeed. In fact, the antibodies in your breastmilk will reduce the likelihood of your baby or young child becoming unwell. It is important to practice good hand hygiene when you are unwell.
- If you are admitted to hospital, make sure nursing staff and doctors are aware you are breastfeeding. Hospital staff can notify the lactation consultant or maternity unit of your admission for further support. Mothers and breastfed babies are kept together where possible. Your baby may be able to stay with you if there is someone there to look after the baby at all times if you are unable to do so.
- If you are too unwell to have your baby with you, it is important that you express to keep up your breast milk supply and prevent breast inflammation or mastitis. Express around the time your baby would normally be feeding. Your support person can bring in a breast pump, and storage containers. There may be a pump you can borrow and a fridge to store your breast milk. Ask for a copy of the handout on Expressing and Storage of breastmilk. If your breast milk supply decreases, you can build it back up by breastfeeding your baby more often once you are at home.

If you have a booked hospitalisation

- Find out from your doctor how long you will need to be in hospital. It will be helpful to build up a store of breastmilk in the freezer prior to your hospitalisation. Expressing your breastmilk can take practice. Try expressing once a day - many women express after a morning feed. If you are unable to collect much milk, wait until 30-60 minutes after the feed, massage your breasts first and then express both breasts. This milk can be stored in food safe bags or containers in the freezer. Write your name, date and time on the milk before you put it in the freezer. Expressing more than once a day may increase your supply, which could lead to full, uncomfortable breasts if or when you are separated from your baby.

If your baby is hospitalised and/or unwell

- If your baby or young child is unwell get a doctor to examine your baby.
- If your baby or young child is in hospital, ask if you can stay overnight so you can care for and breastfeed them.
- When your baby or young child is unwell this may affect their breastfeeding. For example, a baby with a respiratory illness may need to pause and detach from your breast a few times during the feed. Offer your breast often to your unwell baby.
- It is important to maintain your supply of breast milk when your baby or young child is not

feeding as well as they normally do, is having shorter feeds due to illness, or is receiving fluids intravenously. In these situations, you may need to express your breasts when baby would normally be feeding. It may be easier to express with your baby close beside you. If you are having trouble, massage your breasts before expressing and try squeezing or compressing your breasts as you express. If you are with your baby in hospital, your support person can bring in your pump, and food safe containers as needed. Alternatively, there may be a breast pump you can borrow and a fridge to store your milk.

- If the hospitalisation is planned, find out from the doctor how long your baby or young child will need to be in hospital. It may be helpful to build up a store of breast milk in the weeks prior to the hospitalisation by expressing once a day and storing your milk in the freezer (see above).
- Ask the hospital staff and your support system of family and friends to help you and your baby.

Medications and diagnostic tests while breastfeeding

- Let your doctor know that you are breastfeeding, many medications and tests are safe while breastfeeding. MotherSafe can be contacted if you or your doctor require further information on the number below.
- If you require a general anaesthetic, it is generally safe to breastfeed as soon as you are awake and safely able to respond to your baby or young child.
- Occasionally mothers may be advised to cease breastfeeding due to the possible harmful effects of a medication to their baby or young child, for example, chemotherapy agents (for cancer).
- It is safe to breastfeed if you are having an X-ray, MRI, CT, angiogram, ultrasound, or mammogram. (Ref: <https://www.breastfeeding.asn.au/bfinfo/radiology-and-breastfeeding>).
- If you are having a scan involving nuclear medicine, you may need to interrupt breastfeeding and close contact with your baby and other small children for a period of time. This depends on the radiopharmaceutical used. Ask your doctor or call Mothersafe for more information. If you know that you will not be able to breastfeed for a period of time, you can express beforehand to store some breastmilk to give your baby. If you are unable to breastfeed for a period of time, you will need to express for your own comfort and to maintain your milk supply.

Resources

- Your Midwife, Child and Family Health Nurse, or Lactation Consultant
- Australian Breastfeeding Association: breastfeeding.asn.au. 24-hour helpline: 1800 686 268.
- MotherSafe <https://www.seslhd.health.nsw.gov.au/royal-hospital-for-women/services-clinics/directory/mothersafe> (02) 9382-6539
- Raising Children Network www.Raisingchildren.net.au
- Global Health Media Videos: www.globalhealthmedia.org
- Australian Infant Feeding Guidelines (2012) www.eatforhealth.gov.au
- If you need an interpreter, please call Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) on 131 450