

Breast Milk Supply

Breast milk is made in response to a baby sucking and removing milk from the breast. The more the breast is drained of milk, the more milk will be produced. This process is called “supply and demand”. A mother establishes her milk production through feeding often. Over time, the supply will increase to meet the baby’s needs. If a baby cannot breastfeed or is not breastfeeding well, the mother can establish or maintain her milk supply by removing the milk from her breasts at frequent intervals. She may use either hand expression or an efficient electric breast pump.

A mother may worry that she is not producing enough milk because her baby wants to feed more often, increases the length of time feeding or cries more. Babies go through “growth spurts” when they need to feed more often. Resting and feeding often are usually enough to increase the amount of milk to meet the baby’s needs.

Some mothers are also concerned that their breasts no longer leak or appear smaller and softer than they were initially. These changes are normal and will occur as the milk production adjusts to the baby’s needs. If the baby is gaining weight well and is having the expected number of wet and dirty diapers each day, he or she is probably getting enough breast milk.

Factors that may affect milk supply

The following factors can decrease breast milk production:

- Medical conditions such as thyroid problems or infections
- Previous breast surgery (some breast reduction surgeries)
- Heavy blood loss, during or after the birth
- Retained placental fragments
- Stress, pain, or being very tired
- If a baby is not correctly positioned or latched at the breast
- Infrequent feedings, no night feedings
- Limiting lengths or feedings
- Breastfeeding’s only on one breast at each feeding
- Use of soothers or bottles, especially in the early weeks, leading to less frequent breast feeds
- Smoking
- Alcohol use
- Some medications including birth control pills, antihistamine, and some herbal teas
- Incorrect use of nipple shields
- Severed engorgement
- Painful nipples or breasts
- Pregnancy

Talk to your doctor, public health nurse or a lactation consultant if you think any of these factors may be affecting your milk supply.

Tips for increasing your milk supply

- Increase time spent skin-to-skin with your baby
- Get more rest. Ask for help with household tasks
- Eat a well-balanced diet (see Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating) and drink to satisfy thirst
- Feed your baby often (8-12 times a day)
- Increase the number of feeds in 24 hours
- Offer both breasts at every feeding, allowing your baby to finish the first breast first
- Compress your breast (with the thumb on top and fingers underneath) when your baby's sucking slows down, to increase the amount of milk your baby swallows at each feeding
- You can try switching your baby back and forth between breasts, offering each breast twice or more during a feeding
- Express milk after feedings by hand or use an efficient breast pump
- If your baby is not breastfeeding, use an effective electric breast pump set at a comfortable setting, at least 6 to 8 times a day (including once at night)
- The use of a double pump attachment will reduce time spend pumping and allow more rest time between pumping sessions
- Put warm compresses on your breast or massage your breasts before, and while, using the breast pump to increase milk flow
- Ask your doctor about medications that may increase milk supply
- Get help from someone knowledgeable and supportive of your goal to breastfeed your baby

If you have health questions or concerns, call your healthcare provider or Calgary Health Link at:

Calgary (403)-943-LINK (5465)

Toll Free in Alberta: 1-866-408-LINK (5465)