Helpful Information for Breastfeeding Your Baby With Down Syndrome

Congratulations on the birth of your baby! It is wonderful that you have decided to breastfeed and provide your baby with such a special gift.

BREASTFEEDING BASICS
All babies benefit from breastfeeding or receiving breast milk. Breastfeeding can:

- Promote eye and brain development
- Lower the risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS)
- Improve mouth and tongue coordination, which will help speech skills
- Create a special bond with your baby

There are, however, special benefits for babies with Down Syndrome:

- Babies with Down Syndrome have a higher risk of infection. The mother’s body makes antibodies, which she passes on to her baby during breastfeeding. Antibodies help protect your baby against infection.
- Breast milk is very easy to digest, and this is helpful for infants who may have stomach problems related to Down syndrome.
- Skin to skin contact during breastfeeding helps stimulate babies who have low muscle tone, or weak muscles.

GETTING STARTED
When any baby learns to breastfeed, it takes time and patience. Getting off to the best start helps you and your baby succeed with breastfeeding.

- Start breastfeeding as soon after birth as possible.
- Have skin to skin contact with your baby as much as you can. Touch helps increase the breastfeeding hormones. A baby is also likely to begin rooting or nuzzling at the breast and may actually latch-on when having skin to skin contact.
- Feed your baby often, 8 to 12 times in 24 hours, including feedings during the night.
- Get comfortable before you start to feed.
- Position your baby so their body and chin are well supported. This is especially helpful for a baby with low muscle tone. The nurses will help you with this in the hospital.
- Know where to go for help and support after you leave the hospital.

IS MY BABY GETTING ENOUGH MILK?
You can be sure your baby is getting enough milk if you watch for the following:

- Your baby should be breastfeeding 8 to 12 times in 24 hours
- After a week, your baby should have 6 to 8 wet diapers and 3 bowel movements that are yellow, soft and seedy
- Your baby with Down syndrome should gain at least 4 ounces per week
BREASTFEEDING CHALLENGES
Babies with Down syndrome may face some special challenges that might affect breastfeeding. There are many things you can do to work through these challenges and have success.

Low muscle tone
Your baby may have low muscle tone, or weak muscles, especially in their tongue and lips. To help babies with low muscle tone during breastfeeding, do the following:
- Keep your baby’s body and chin well supported
- Support the base of your baby’s head with your hand. Too much pressure on the back of your baby’s head can cause a poor latch.

Sleepiness
Your baby may be extra sleepy, which can affect feeding patterns. Babies who fall asleep may also not get enough milk, especially the end milk or “hind milk.” End milk has extra fat and calories which help your baby to grow.
- Dim the lights in the room so your baby doesn’t have to close his or her eyes against the light
- Remove all of your baby’s clothing except the diaper to help keep him or her alert
- Wash your baby’s face with a wet cloth
- Gently stroke and talk to your baby during the feed
- Compress and massage your breast while breastfeeding. This will help the milk flow and keep your baby interested in breastfeeding.

Tongue Thrusting
Babies with Down syndrome may have a protruding tongue that pushes against your nipple. To help these babies breastfeed, try the following:
- Wait for your baby to open wide (like a yawn) with his tongue forward and down
- Gently press down on your baby’s chin. Opening the jaw will help the tongue come forward.
- Teach your baby how to keep his or her tongue down. Put your index finger on the center of your baby’s tongue. Push down and gently pull your finger out.
- Allow your baby to suck on your finger so he develops rhythmic sucking rather than biting.

WHAT IF MY BABY IS NOT BREASTFEEDING?
Some babies might not breastfeed while at the hospital. Your medical staff can help you create an individual feeding plan to make sure your baby gets all the nutrition he needs to grow and thrive. After you leave the hospital, you will meet often with your pediatrician who will help make changes to the feeding plan as needed. During this time, it is important to build and protect your milk supply. Building a milk supply usually happens if your baby is breastfeeding a lot. If your baby is not breastfeeding, the medical staff will help teach you how to get a double electric breast pump and how to pump your breasts. In the end, some babies do not breastfeed. However, giving your baby your breast milk from a pump will still give your baby all the wonderful benefits.

SUPPORT
Your nurse in the hospital will help you with breastfeeding. She will also arrange a visit with a lactation, or breastfeeding, consultant during your stay. The more help and support you have, the more successful you will be. It is important to check with your pediatrician to see if they have a staff member who can help with breastfeeding or make a referral to someone who can. Ask your nurse in the hospital for available resources. Zipmilk.org is a great website that can provide you with Lactation Consultants, La Leche League Groups and other support groups in your community. For more information, we recommend Breastfeeding and Down Syndrome, a book edited by Ella Gray Cullen (2021), available at downsyndromepregnancy.org/book/breastfeeding-and-down-syndrome/.