

How Breastfeeding Works

We all know how to breastfeed, but do you know how breastfeeding actually works? When you become pregnant your body begins preparing itself to make milk. You start feeling these changes pretty early in pregnancy. It starts out as simple as your breast feeling fuller with some tenderness. These changes are the beginning of the process of making milk.

Once you give birth, your baby can smell your milk. This is possible through the Montgomery glands. These glands are tiny sebaceous glands around the areolas. They produce an oily substance that cleans and lubricates the areola and nipple. This substance is what releases a pheromone that helps babies find the nipple and latch on. The suckling from your baby releases hormones in your body that causes your breast to make and release milk.

Alveoli are where the milk production occurs in the breast. The alveoli are grape-like clusters of cells surrounded by muscles. Once the milk has been made it is then pushed through the alveoli (by the muscles) into the milk ducts. The milk ducts resemble highways and carry the milk through the breast. Your breast isn't the only thing that plays a role in the production of breast milk though, your brain is also involved.

When your baby nurses, it sends signals to your brain. This alerts your brain and it signals the hormones (prolactin and oxytocin) to be released. Prolactin causes the alveoli to start making breast milk and oxytocin makes the muscles around the alveoli squeeze the milk throughout the milk ducts. When milk is released, most moms feel the milk ejection reflex. Formerly known as "let down" the proper term is now milk release.

The more milk your baby drinks, the more milk you will make. Breastfeeding is supply and demand. Ideally you want to breastfeed your baby at least 8-12 times in a 24-hour timeframe. Doing this in the first few days of life will help you establish your supply. To maintain your supply, you want to continue this and stick to a good schedule. Over time your supply will fluctuate due to your baby's needs.

If you have breastfeeding questions or concerns, feel free to reach out to the Meigs County Health Dept. (MCHD) WIC office. WIC offers breastfeeding support for all pregnant or breastfeeding moms regardless of WIC eligibility/enrollment. Office hours are Monday-Thursday 8am-12pm & 1pm-4pm. The phone number is (740) 992-0392. If you or someone you know might be pregnant, the MCHD offers pregnancy testing Monday-Friday 8am-4pm. The phone number is (740) 992-6626.

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