



How to Know When to Feed Your Baby

Feed your baby whenever he wants to eat. He'll use *hunger cues* (physical signs) to tell you when he wants milk. For example, he'll show you he's hungry by sucking on anything close to his mouth. Or he'll make little sounds and try to suck on his hands. Or he'll suck on his blanket or your arm. If you miss these early hunger cues, he'll begin to fuss and then finally cry. Try to feed your baby before he cries. It's harder to feed him when he's crying. How often will your baby eat? Here are some guidelines about feeding patterns in the early weeks:

- Most new babies nurse every 1–3 hours. However, babies don't always eat on a regular schedule. Sometimes a baby will eat every hour for several feedings and then sleep for 3–4 hours.
- Most newborns nurse between 8 and 18 times a day. It's common to have about 12 feedings each day. After several weeks, your baby will be able to take in more milk at each feeding. This usually reduces the number of feedings each day.
- Let your baby nurse at each breast for as long as he wants. Longer feedings help your baby get plenty of milk. Feedings may last 20–40 minutes or longer.
- The length of a feeding often depends on your baby's size and feeding style. Some babies suck hard and fast and have shorter feedings. Others suck a little, pause, and suck again. Other babies fall asleep at the breast and then wake up and nurse again. It takes these babies a long time to get enough milk.

It's easier to feed your baby when he wants to eat rather than feeding him on a schedule. Trying to make a hungry baby wait until a certain time to nurse will be upsetting for both of you. Also, it's hard to wake a baby for a feeding. You don't need to wake your baby unless he's losing weight or has jaundice. If your baby has jaundice, he may sleep through a feeding time. So, in the first weeks, awaken your baby if he sleeps over 4 hours. Babies have *growth spurts* that last 2–7 days. During these times, your baby is growing faster and needs to eat more often. Growth spurts occur at about 3 weeks, 6 weeks, 3 months, and 6 months of age. At these times, your baby may nurse every hour or so. His frequent feedings tell your breasts to make more milk. This increases your milk supply, and your baby gets more milk at each feeding. When you're making enough milk, he'll go back to having fewer feedings. These growth spurts may make you feel like you're feeding all the time. However, as your baby grows and takes more milk at each feeding, you'll begin to feel that you have more time for yourself between feedings.

For more information on pregnancy:

See our books: *Pregnancy, Childbirth & the Newborn* or *The Simple Guide to Having a Baby*.
Take a childbirth preparation class at Great Starts, or in your local community.

For parenting tips, information for families, or to talk to someone about parenting:

In Washington State: Call the Family Help Line at 1-800-932-HOPE

Outside of WA: contact your local Circle of Parents agency at www.circleofparents.org

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