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A Grandparent's guide to supporting Parents to Express Breast Milk for Premature babies on the Neonatal unit

Neonatal Department

Congratulations on becoming a grandparent either again or for the first time!

You might be feeling worried and unable to help when your grandchild is on the neonatal unit, but one way you can really help and contribute to baby's care is to support the childbearing parent to express colostrum and breast milk.

They are already under a lot of pressure and didn't want to breastfeed, why does this matter?

Breast milk is a highly effective medicine for premature babies. Unlike formula milk or donated breast milk, freshly expressing breast milk reduces rates of necrotising enterocolitis (a serious gut condition), retinopathy of prematurity (can cause blindness) and ventilator-associated pneumonia by 2/3rds!

A lot of parents who didn't plan on breastfeeding their baby, change their minds when told of these benefits, which are achieved solely through their breast milk. This doesn't mean that parents have to go home breastfeeding, but supplying colostrum (early milk), and breast milk for the duration of their NICU admission has huge advantages.

We understand that this time around the birth of a preterm baby is highly stressful for families, but if expression of colostrum takes place within a couple of hours of birth, and 3 hourly after that, milk volumes are higher by an average of 150ml a day over the first few weeks!

We don't want this to be a burden. We'd rather the emphasis be on empowering the parents to play an active role in helping their baby to get better in a way that only they can! And parents will be shown how to give this milk to baby themselves, which can be a very special moment.

Deciding to continue breastfeeding at discharge reduces the risk of sudden infant death (SIDS/cot death), which we know is significantly higher in preterm infants. It also reduces their risk of tummy bugs, colds, obesity and heart disease.

Breastfeeding long term also reduces maternal rates of breast cancer, ovarian cancer and being overweight.

What can I do to help?

Enable the expressing parent to take good care of themselves.

Expressing is a full-time job. To get the best volumes for baby we encourage expression 8 times a day with at least once of those times between midnight and 6am. This will maximise the milk supply and the more breast milk a baby receives, the better their outcomes for a range of conditions.

Good nutrition, hydration and rest are vital for maintaining a nutritious breast milk supply. Supply parents with some ready-made meals or a voucher for a meal service.

A warm bath or shower and relaxation will also help to increase milk supply, as well as potentially helping parents to feel better. Relaxation recordings have also been found to help this.

Expressing shouldn't be painful. If they are finding it painful then it is worth troubleshooting with the neonatal unit's breastfeeding advisor. The breast-shield could be the wrong size, and mastitis and blocked ducts can still occur with pumping. Support them. Expressing can be a lonely job. Help them to feel comfortable and supported to express anywhere they want to. Pumping parents shouldn't have to shut themselves away if they don't want to.

If I can't give the baby a bottle how will I get to know my new grandchild?

It's not helpful to suggest giving formula as this can reduce the mother's milk supply and potentially be detrimental to preterm babies.

As a premature baby, breastfeeding is an advanced skill and sometimes bottles in the early weeks in particular, can confuse baby's latch. Please follow parents' wishes with this and avoid suggesting bottles if you can.

There are other ways you can help if the parents would like you too such as winding, changing, soothing and cuddling.

New mums may be particularly sensitive to negative comments, and family support can make the world of difference to them at this vulnerable time. Positivity and encouragement can really help build their confidence in their ability to provide for their little one.

Thank you for reading this booklet. For further reading we recommend the Lullaby Trust's Safer Sleep guidance.

**This document is available in Welsh/
Mae'r ddogfen hon ar gael yn Gymraeg**