Night Feedings

UNICEF and WHO developed "ten steps to successful breastfeeding". One of their recommendations is to offer unrestricted breastfeeding, both day and night. Prolactin is the hormone that stimulates milk production. Prolactin levels are higher during the night than during the day. Nighttime feedings are thus important to establish and maintain a good milk supply. Most people understand and accept that a newborn needs to be fed around the clock. But after a couple of weeks or months, people might start asking whether or not your baby is sleeping through the night. If this isn't the case yet, you might start to worry: Is my milk not good enough? Do I have too little milk? Maybe I should have already started solids? Or should I just force my baby to sleep through the night by letting him cry it out? The questions that need to be answered however are: What are realistic expectations? When can I expect my baby to sleep through the night? What can help me to cope with night feedings? Are there gentle ways to encourage my baby to sleep through the night? These are some of the questions I will discuss in this handout.

Our Expectations: Realistic or Not?

Did you know?

- Night feedings are normal. Most people think that the need for night feeds reduces the older the baby becomes. However, research has shown that this isn't always true. The number of night feedings seems to reduce between the ages of two weeks and three months, but then it increases again between the ages of four and six months. Some research shows an increase of night waking at around nine months of age. When you return to work, your baby might want to breastfeed more at night or on your days off. As the baby grows older, night feedings do decrease, but not as fast as most people think. One study showed that in a ten-hour night (8 pm till 6 am) babies up until one year of age still breastfeed six to seven times. Between the ages of one and two, babies might feed two to three times at night! It is not until after 24 months that regular night waking becomes less common.
- Night feedings are beneficial for mother and baby:
    - Night waking may be essential to your baby's health. His ability to wake up during sleep is important to let you know that your baby has an unmet need such as hunger, discomfort, or temperature control.
    - Very young babies who have long periods of quiet, deep sleep are at greater risk of SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome).
    - Night feedings help build and maintain your milk supply, it reduces the risk of hormone-related cancers, and it delays menstruation.
- A way to provide comfort and security. Breastfeeding is more than nutrition. It is a place of comfort, security, warmth, closeness, and familiarity. These needs are as real as baby's physical hunger. When you comfort the baby at night, you are not teaching your baby a bad habit: you are teaching him that you are there for him when he needs you! Research has shown that night feeding does not seem to condition children to frequent waking.

Let's start with realistic expectations about night feedings: Night feedings are normal, temporary, and children grow out of it (even when we do nothing to discourage it!). Some breastfed babies will need night feeds for a long period of time. Others might start sleeping through the night when they're a few months old. Every baby is different! Each baby will begin to comfort himself and sleep for longer stretches at his own developmental age! Knowing this might help us have a different, more relaxed attitude towards night feedings. If the amount

that your child sleeps and nurses isn't a problem for you, then there is no reason to change anything. If night feeding is not working for you, then encourage changes while taking into account the needs of your child.

Helping you Cope with Night Feedings

- Oxytocin reduces stress and helps you go back to sleep. Did you know that the hormone oxytocin, which is released when you breastfeed, doesn't only cause milk ejection, but also helps you relax and causes you to be come sleepy? This effect of oxytocin will help you to go back to sleep after you breastfeed your baby at night.
- Do as little as possible at night. Feed your baby when he tells you he is hungry. Don't turn on any lights, don't change the diaper (unless it is running out or he has a diaper rash). If your baby "really wakes" up you will be ready to go to sleep and he will be ready to play.
- Sleep when your baby sleeps. Accustom yourself to quick "cat-naps" to help you feel refreshed.
- Change your life style and expectations. Feeding around the clock, broken nights, adapting to your new role as parents takes time and energy. Allow yourself space and time for this process. Don't expect to continue life as it was before pregnancy. You will have to adjust your plans and goals. This will save a lot of frustration, disappointments, tension and fatigue.

Gentle Ways to Encourage Your Baby to Sleep Through the Night

Let's first get a common misunderstanding out of the way:

- Feeding solids in the evening won't help your baby sleep through the night. Many parents start with giving cereal in the evening because some parents wrongly believe or have been told that feeding solids to the baby help him sleep through the night. However, according to well-controlled studies, babies who receive solids before bedtime have the same sleep patterns as do babies who are not given solids.

So, what are things that you can do to encourage your baby in a gentle way to sleep through the night:

- Encourage the baby to spend more time awake during the day by feeding and playing with him.
- Ensure effective feedings during the day. Sometimes babies can become so distracted during the daytime feedings that they don't take in enough milk and then they make up for it during the night. Minimize distractions when you feed during the day: Breastfeed in a quiet room, close the door, turn off the lights, try to feed when lying down. Make sure older children are busy doing something before you start breastfeeding.
- Breastfeed often before bedtime and get a feed in before you go to bed.
- If your baby appears to be waking only for comfort during the night, then try other ways to settle him, such as a back rub, holding and cuddling, getting a drink of water, humming softly, lying next to him.
- Have dad comfort the baby. Your baby won't expect dad to breastfeed him. Dad may even need to sleep with the baby in another room, away from mom.
- With an older child (over 18 months) you can explain that night time is a time to sleep and not to eat.

Remember that getting your baby to sleep through the night is not a battle to be won. If night weaning is not going well, then try again a little later.

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