

# Breastfeeding an infant with Down syndrome

Down syndrome is the most common chromosomal abnormality in human infants. Usually the nucleus of each cell contains 23 pairs of chromosomes, half of which are inherited from each parent. Down syndrome occurs when some or all of a person's cells have an extra full or partial copy of chromosome 21.

## The importance of breastfeeding

Breastfeeding is important for infants with Down syndrome because they:

- Have an increased risk of infection, especially respiratory tract infections. The anti-infective factors in breastmilk help protect infants against infection.
- Have an increased risk of having short and narrow Eustachian tubes, increasing their risk of ear infections. Breastfeeding reduces this risk.
- Often have low muscle tone. Breastfeeding helps to stimulate the infant's orofacial muscles and tongue, aiding their development. In these ways, breastfeeding helps prepare infants with Down syndrome for eating other foods and speech development.
- Have an increased risk of constipation and breastmilk can assist with minimising constipation.

## Breastfeeding challenges

Many infants with Down syndrome breastfeed without difficulty; however, for others it takes time to learn how to feed well. They often have low muscle tone which means greater effort is needed to change or maintain a position. It may be difficult for them to grasp the breast, attach correctly and maintain a vacuum. Some infants may have difficulty coordinating their sucking, swallowing and breathing and may gulp as they feed. They may get less milk for their efforts and tire quickly. They may also have congenital heart or bowel abnormalities, or be born prematurely. These conditions can pose their own challenges for breastfeeding and often require the mother to express her breastmilk at least for a period of time.



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# FACT SHEET

for health professionals

## Breastfeeding tips

- It can help to stimulate the milk-ejection reflex prior to putting the infant to the breast so that they do not have to spend energy sucking with little result.
- Ensuring the infant is positioned well at the breast with their body well supported means they use as little energy as possible to hold their head and neck up. Sometimes the use of pillows can help the infant hold their head up high enough so that their mouth is level with the nipple. An extra pillow to raise their bottom to near the level of their head may also help. Also, swaddling some infants for feeds in the early weeks can assist with minimising any excess limb movements and hence help conserve energy. See photos of breastfeeding positions in our [Breastfeeding: your baby with Down syndrome](#) booklet.
- The Dancer hand position describes a position whereby the mother supports her breast and her infant's chin while feeding. It can help infants use less energy to maintain their position at the breast. The mother cups her hand under her breast, then slides it forward so that 3 fingers support her breast and a U-shape is made with her thumb and first finger to support her infant's jaw in the U.
- Use of **breast compressions** can assist infants to get the milk they need when feeding.
- Nipple shields can assist some infants to attach to the breast.

## Weight gains

Many infants with Down syndrome gain weight slowly. It is preferable to use growth charts designed specifically for children with Down syndrome when assessing weight gain.

See: <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/birthdefects/downsyndrome/growth-charts.html>

## Resources

Brodribb, W. (ed) 2019, *Breastfeeding Management in Australia*. 5th ed.

Australian Breastfeeding Association, Victoria.

Australian Breastfeeding Association 2019 [Breastfeeding: your baby with Down syndrome](#) booklet.



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