



Australian
Breastfeeding
Association

For Health
Professionals

Breastfeeding a baby with Down syndrome

Down syndrome is the most common chromosomal abnormality in human infants. Features of the condition can make breastfeeding more challenging for infants with Down syndrome, but the right information and support can help these mother-infant pairs to reach their breastfeeding goals.

The importance of breastfeeding

Breastfeeding is especially important for infants with Down syndrome because they:

- have an increased risk of infection, especially respiratory tract infections. The immune factors in breastmilk help protect infants against infection.
- often have short and narrow Eustachian tubes, increasing their risk of ear infections. Breastfeeding lessens this risk.
- typically have low muscle tone. Breastfeeding helps to stimulate the infant's orofacial muscles and tongue, aiding the long-term development of speech and feeding skills.
- have an increased risk of constipation. Breastmilk is easily digested.

Breastfeeding challenges

Many infants with Down syndrome breastfeed without difficulty, however, others take 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.

Associated health conditions such as prematurity or congenital heart or bowel abnormalities can also pose their own challenges for breastfeeding and may require a mother to express her breastmilk for a period of time.

Supporting an infant with Down syndrome to breastfeed

There are adjustments a mother can make to encourage and support her infant as they learn to breastfeed:

- **Stimulating the milk-ejection reflex** prior to putting the infant to the breast means they do not have to spend energy sucking with little result. Gently stroking the breast or hand expressing can start the flow of milk.
- **A supportive breastfeeding position** will minimise how much energy the infant expends to hold their head and neck up. A reclined breastfeeding position can help, or pillows can be used to raise the infant's head and torso so their mouth is level with the nipple.



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Further reading

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Academy of Breastfeeding Medicine (2016). ABM Clinical Protocol #16: *Breastfeeding the hypotonic infant*.

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Williams, G. M., Leary, S., Leadbetter, S., Toms, S., Mortimer, G., Scorer, T., Gillespie, K., & Shield, J. P. H. (2022). *Establishing breast feeding in infants with Down syndrome: the FADES cohort experience*. *BMJ Paediatrics Open*, 6(1), e001547.

- **The Dancer hand position** can be used to support the breast and the 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. Her thumb and first finger form a U-shape which supports her infant's jaw.
- **Swaddling** can help reduce energy being consumed by spontaneous body movements in the early weeks.
- **Breast compressions** can be used to assist the infant to get the milk they need when feeding.
- **Nipple shields** can be helpful in some cases if the infant cannot attach to the breast or remove milk effectively.
- **Shorter, more frequent feeds** may be necessary if the infant is sleepy or tires easily.
- **Expressed breastmilk** can be provided, if needed, using a breastfeeding supplementer (supply line), nasogastric tube or special bottle. Expressing can also help a mother to establish a full milk supply while her infant is learning to breastfeed well.

Weight gains

Many infants with Down syndrome gain weight slowly. There are growth charts designed specifically for children with Down syndrome to help healthcare providers monitor their growth. See: cdc.gov/ncbddd/birthdefects/downsyndrome/growth-charts.html

Resources for families

Information about breastfeeding an infant with Down syndrome can be found by searching for 'Down syndrome' on the Australian Breastfeeding Association (ABA) website, breastfeeding.asn.au

The informative booklet, *Breastfeeding: your baby with Down syndrome*, is available for purchase in digital or printed format from ABA's online [Marketplace](#).

Mothers of infants with Down syndrome often require additional support to establish and maintain breastfeeding. ABA breastfeeding counsellors do not provide medical advice. However, a call to the [National Breastfeeding Helpline](#) on 1800 686 268 can provide a woman with reassurance, support and practical suggestions.