

BREASTFEEDING: HOW CAN DAD HELP?

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Many dads feel left out when it comes to breastfeeding. They can't feed the baby themselves and they envy the closeness the mother and baby share when nursing. But, though they may not realize it, fathers play a key role in breastfeeding. Their support often makes the difference in whether a woman sticks with nursing and succeeds or gives up before she really learns how.

The father's support is critical, especially in a mother that is breastfeeding for the first time," says Amy Spangler, a nurse, lactation consultant and the author of "Amy Spangler's Breastfeeding: A Parent's Guide." "The Dad is the person who is with her the most and knows her the best. If he is enthusiastic, knowledgeable and supportive, it makes all the difference in the world as to whether or not breastfeeding will be successful and enjoyable for that Mom and baby."

Without their partner's help, many women don't make it through the sometimes-rocky first days and weeks of nursing. When a father makes the effort to encourage and reassure the new mother, she tends to feel more confident in her choice of breastfeeding.

"The best thing a husband can do is just be willing to support you in your struggle," says Ana, a Minneapolis mother of three, who has always had a hard time getting started with breastfeeding, but kept at it because she knew it was best for her children. "I think a lot of times they don't understand why we fight so hard to do it when it seems so much easier to give the baby a formula bottle. You really have to have a husband who understands why you are doing it and is committed so that when you think you want to give up, he can cheer you on."

The hardest thing for many dads is feeling left out in the first days and weeks of the baby's life. But that's the best time to jump in and learn how to do other things that can help them bond with their babies. Some fathers sing to their babies or carry them in a snuggly pouch or even learn how to give them a sponge bath. A great way for a father to bond with his newborn is to put the infant - dressed just in a diaper -- on his bare chest, so the baby can feel his warm skin and learn how Daddy smells, while they both snuggle under a blanket.

A surprising number of fathers join the ranks of the sleepless by getting out of bed to get the baby and change a diaper before handing the hungry bundle to the mother.

"She was great about picking up Noah in the middle of the night and bringing him to me for his feeding, changing his diaper, and holding and cuddling him," says Ruth, a dedicated breast feeder and mother of two who lives in Southern California.

Other fathers bring hot towels to relieve engorgement or take over baby care so the new mother can have a nice, hot shower to relax before she nurses again.

"I think men feel very left out of this process, so it is important to get them involved in whatever way you can," Ana says.

Lisa, a graphic designer in Montara, Calif., says her husband would get up early with Tom, now 1, and play for awhile to give her some extra sleep time.

"While I was breastfeeding, he would bring me water or juice and a book or magazine," she said. "Sometimes we would just sit and talk. That was the best."

Providing food and drink are great ways to help new mothers keep their milk supply up. Many new mothers are so busy with their babies that they don't take the time to eat properly and they don't realize that they're not drinking enough to allow their bodies to make adequate supplies of milk.

Those same mothers may have been adamant about eating plenty of fruits and vegetables while they were pregnant. But once the baby arrives, they forget that they're still a key part in their infant's development: the sole supplier of their newborn's food and drink.

Spangler says fathers need to remember that they play an important role in infant development. She says fathers - and mothers - need to remember that infants learn by being touched. Rocking and cuddling and holding are key to their growth.

"Breastfeeding is such a small part of parenting," Spangler says. "There are so many other needs a baby has beyond eating. It's up to Dads to be creative and tap into those needs."

First-time fathers, especially, need to be encouraged to hold and play with their newborns, because they are often hesitant to hold the tiny babies. Every new mother should make sure the baby's father spends plenty of time holding and cuddling the baby. This is especially important when the father has to compete with his wife's mother, sisters, neighbors and his own mother to get a chance to hold the baby.

Once breastfeeding is well-established, Dads can get involved in the feeding process by giving the baby a bottle of expressed breast milk. It's better to wait several weeks, until the milk supply is well-established and the baby is an accomplished nurser, before having the father try giving a bottle of breast milk.

New fathers can be even more help if they arm themselves with lots of information - from books, classes and online resources like Breastfeeding.com. Talking to friends who have gone through it can help prepare them for the sometimes-challenging experience. Just making the effort to learn about breastfeeding before the baby arrives shows that a father is anxious to be an active part of the baby's life.

"I read one or two of the books we brought home on early child-rearing to show my support," says Ted, a U.S. Air Force pilot with two young children. "I agreed to stay out of the way and let Mary do it, as she was the only one of us two armed with the proper equipment."

But, he says, he found other ways to help out.

"I did a lot of burping after a feeding when I was home," Ted recalls. "And I cleaned up messes."

Other Dads use themselves as human shields to give their wives privacy while they nurse in public.

"I found that, while my wife certainly had a healthy perspective on how natural and OK breastfeeding in public is, she just felt more comfortable with me as a body shield. It felt more private and it felt safer to her," says Bill, a California executive whose son is 18 months old.

Some fathers find themselves following arcane traditions to keep their wives' milk supplies up.

"My husband's solution to speed up milk production in the first week is to run to the store and bring me back some dark beer, according to what he says is European tradition," says Patty Brown, a partner in Breastfeeding.com and mother of three. "I hate the beer, but the attention is awesome."

Getting started breastfeeding - and keeping it up for the first year of the baby's life, as the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends - is so much easier when the new mother and father act as a team, encouraging each other and helping each other to be supportive, involved parents, nursing experts agree. First-time parents, especially, need to remember that they need to work together to learn how to become good parents, Spangler says.

"A new mother is just as scared as the father is of doing the wrong thing. Confidence comes with spending time with that baby ... and with practice," Spangler says.



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