

Partners and breastfeeding

It is not unusual for partners to have mixed feelings about breastfeeding. You may feel happy and be looking forward to your baby being breastfed but you may also feel a little anxious and unprepared.

People's perception of what 'female breasts' are for can vary and for some males and females alike they can be seen purely as body parts related to sexuality and attractiveness.

The fact that nature intended breasts to be used for feeding a baby may never have been realised or talked about.

Partners may believe that breastfeeding doesn't really have anything to do with them and may even worry about being left out of the whole feeding experience of their new baby.

Partners may be totally unaware of the vital role they play in the success of their baby being breastfed and there is research to show that dads are very important in many aspects of the breastfeeding experience which includes

- The initial decision by a couple to breastfeed their baby.
- The support offered to the mother, particularly during the early weeks following the birth
- The ongoing support which encourages continuation of breastfeeding beyond the early weeks of a baby's life

Being a parent is about teamwork and sharing in a relationship of bringing up a child. There are lots of things that need to be done for a baby and everything a parent does, even the smallest of things play a vital role in your baby's brain development and emotional wellbeing.

One of the first decisions you can make to help give your baby the best start in life is for your baby to be breastfed as breast milk has many benefits.

Breast milk contains lots of healthy goodness which is 100% natural and will benefit both baby and mum. For example it can protect your baby from ear, chest and gastro-intestinal infections. And for mum it can lower her risk of developing some cancers.

What can partners do to help a mum and baby breastfeed?

- Help mum find a comfortable position and stay close by in case she needs anything. It can feel supportive to mum if you sit together for a while and enjoy the feeding experience together as a family.
- Offer words and gestures of encouragement as mum may be feeling unsure of how well she is doing.

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- Mum and baby will need rest and time for breastfeeding to become established so partners can help by doing shopping, cooking, caring for any other children in the family and ensuring that visitors are not calling too frequently.

Partner's time with baby

- Your baby will love having time with you so get involved with bath time and nappy changing. Try not to see these as chores or jobs to be done, instead see them as special times when you can interact and have fun with your baby.
- Singing and talking with your baby will encourage their physical and brain development and bonding with you
- Take your baby out for a walk either in pram or baby carrier. Your baby will learn to enjoy the outdoors which is good for future exercise and activities. This will also give mum a short break too.
- Once breastfeeding is established mum may wish to try and express breast milk which will give you an opportunity to feed your baby as well.

Be proud that you have given your baby the best start

Coping with other people's opinions

For some partners they may be the first person in the family to have a partner who is breastfeeding their baby and this can create some issues. Some partners have been surprised by how supportive others have been whilst others have received comments and jokes that have caused embarrassment and annoyance.

Being prepared for such reactions can help to manage a situation. You may simply respond by saying something like: *'We decided as parents that we wanted to give our baby the best start in life and breastfeeding will do that and we're really pleased with our choice.'*

In general negative comments can soon become boring to listen to and generally stop; however if they persist keep calm and have a quiet word requesting the person to stop. Sometimes people don't realise that they are causing offence.

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Your relationship with your partner

Couples are often concerned if breastfeeding will affect their relationship and sex life. In the early days after childbirth both partners may be feeling overwhelmed and tired whilst they adapt to their new baby. Also mum may have some physical issues to recover from such as stitches, back pain and breast tenderness.

Talking to each other about how you are feeling is really important. It is not uncommon for you both to feel hesitant in resuming sexual contact and you both may feel unsure about how to become intimate again.

Some couples may misunderstand how the other feels, for example a woman may feel sensitive about her changing body and may have anxieties that their partner has lost interest in her.

Initially sexual intercourse may be uncomfortable and it is not unusual for breast milk to seep out from the breasts at this time so have a small cloth near by. Just remember to go at a pace that suits you both. A cuddle and some time lying together may be a good way of becoming close and intimate again.

If you would like any further information please speak to your midwife, health visitor or GP.

For more information visit www.inourplace.co.uk

