

Feeding and Nutrition

How will my preemie baby be fed when he/she is so small?

If your baby is sick or very tiny, your baby will be fed through a vein. He/she will likely be started on total parenteral nutrition (TPN). With TPN, protein, fat, sugar, vitamins and minerals are added to the fluids that the baby gets. Your baby can get all he/she needs and grow on TPN alone. As your baby does well on other feedings, the TPN will be decreased.

Your baby may be started on tube feedings. A tube is passed through the mouth into your baby's stomach. Milk is put through the tube. It may be given as a constant slow drip on a pump (called continuous infusion), or as a drip feeding when milk is given every few hours. Either way, the amounts will be very small at first and slowly increased. There is often a time between TPN and tube feedings where the amount of TPN slowly decreases as the amount from tube feeding increases.

Can I breastfeed my baby?

Yes, a premature baby may breastfeed. At first, a small baby will not be able to suck. However, you can pump breastmilk for your baby. Other nutrients may be added to the breastmilk. (See Guidelines for Pumping Mothers.)

When will my baby gain weight?

Almost all babies lose weight before they begin to gain weight. This weight loss may be 5-15% of the baby's birth weight. Much of the weight loss is loss of water because the baby is no longer surrounded by fluid. Sometimes very sick babies gain weight the first few days. This is not real weight gain. It is from storing water. As the baby gets well, the baby will lose weight. Usually a baby does not regain his/her birth weight until two or more weeks of age.



When can my baby bottle or breast feed?

All babies use a suck/swallow/breathe pattern when feeding. This pattern usually becomes strong enough to safely breast or bottle feed at about 34 weeks of gestation. However, there are big differences among babies. Some are ready at 32 weeks; others are not ready at 36 weeks. Nurses can often tell when a baby is getting close to this time by how a baby acts during a tube feeding. Your baby's doctors and nurses will determine when to start. At first your baby will have only one or two bottle/breast feedings a day. This will slowly increase as the baby gets used to the extra work of feeding. Bottle and breast feeding requires more work than tube feeding. Babies who have had serious lung problems may be slower to start and slower to advance on feedings.

Adapted from University of Wisconsin Perinatal Program.

This information has been reviewed and recommended for use by the UAMS/CPED/Patient Education Advisory Committee.