

NIPPLE SHIELDS

Nipple shields can be useful tools for helping babies learn to breastfeed effectively in situations such as these:

- babies who thrust or retract their tongues while breastfeeding
- babies with neurological impairments or delays
- babies whose suck is weak or who have trouble latching on to the breast and staying on
- babies who are born prematurely
- babies who cannot latch onto their mother's inverted nipples

Nipple shields are not necessary for every mother, and other techniques for improving the baby's ability to latch on should be tried first. However, when used under the supervision of a knowledgeable health care provider, nipple shields can help some mothers and babies establish a satisfying breastfeeding relationship.

Nipple shields are not a good first choice for most mothers with sore nipples. Soreness will heal when your baby is latched on well during nursing. If your baby's sucking ability doesn't improve after using a nipple shield or any other technique, he should be seen by someone trained in resolving sucking problems related to breastfeeding.

WHY USE A SHIELD?

When a baby is having trouble learning to breastfeed, using a nipple shield can keep him at the breast instead of requiring him to learn another method of feeding. The baby receives his mother's milk through the holes at the tip of the shield, eliminating or reducing the need to express and feed milk in another way.

Nipple shields seem to help some babies breastfeed by providing a firm stimulus at the roof of the baby's mouth, where the hard palate and soft palate meet. Such a stimulus helps encourage the baby to suck effectively.

TYPES OF NIPPLE SHIELDS

Nipple shields are now made with silicone, which is thinner and softer than the older rubber models. The two main styles available are the circular nipple

shield and the contact nipple shield. (See illustration.) The circular shield is a concave circle of soft silicone with a firmer tip in the center that fits over the mother's nipple. The contact shield is similar, but instead of the soft brim forming a complete circle, there is a cut-out area, which is meant to be positioned so that the baby's nose can touch his mother's skin during breastfeeding. The cut-out area may also prevent the brim from bending back against the baby's face.



Contact shield

Full shield

FIT

To be effective, a nipple shield needs to be a good fit for both mother and baby. Two measurements to consider are the length of the tip (teat) section and the width of the tip section. The length should match the size of the baby's mouth so the tip of the nipple shield goes far enough back in his mouth to encourage effective sucking, but not so far that it causes him to gag. In general, shorter tips work better for smaller babies and longer tips work better for larger babies. The width of the tip section should fit around the mother's nipple so it will stay on securely without being too loose or too tight.

As of this writing, nipple shields that have shorter teats or tips also have narrower nipple openings. Those that have longer tips have wider nipple openings. This means that in some cases, a shield may be a good fit for a baby, but not necessarily for the mother. Currently, some nipple shield manufacturers are in the process of developing a wider range of sizes to make finding a good fit for both mother and baby easier.

Good positioning and latch-on are important when using a shield. If your baby's latch-on is too shallow, the tip of the shield won't reach far enough into his mouth to trigger active sucking. If he doesn't get enough of the shield in his mouth, he also won't be able to remove milk from your breasts effectively.



APPLYING THE SHIELD

There are differences of opinion about how best to apply a nipple shield. Here are a few suggestions.

- Place the shield over your breast, with your nipple centered inside the tip. Press your fingers along the edge of the brim to keep it in place.
- Place the shield on your breast with the soft brim turned out away from the breast, then smooth the brim onto your breast.
- Turn the tip halfway inside out and place it over your nipple. Then slowly ease the shield fully right side out and onto the nipple.
- Dip the shield in hot or warm water before putting it on or apply a small bit of Lansinoh Brand Lanolin for Breastfeeding Mothers ® to help it cling to your skin.

MILK SUPPLY CONCERNS

When use of a nipple shield starts, mothers should monitor their supply of milk and their babies' weight gain carefully. In the first few days, it is helpful to pump after feedings. Milk gathered in this way can be used as a supplement if one is needed. Mothers of babies who are premature or have neurological disorders may have been pumping before starting to use a nipple shield.

After nursing, look for milk in the tip of the shield and check for a decrease in breast firmness. Your baby's health care provider may suggest periodic weight checks to make sure your baby is getting enough milk. You can also monitor the adequacy of your milk supply by keeping track of the number of your baby's wet and dirty diapers.

If your baby needs a supplement, you can use a nursing supplementer along with a nipple shield. A supplementer encourages some babies to suckle well, because swallowing helps trigger more effective suckling. Pay close attention to your baby's position at the breast as you begin using a supplementer to be sure he is sucking actively and taking enough of your breast into his mouth. Some babies learn to suck the supplement from the supplementer without breastfeeding effectively.

WEANING FROM A SHIELD

Follow your baby's cues in discontinuing use of the nipple shield. A baby may use a nipple shield for a few days or a few months. Premature babies who use nipple shields are often observed to stop needing to use them around the time of their original due dates.

During the time your baby is weaning from a nipple shield, keep a close watch on how many wet and dirty

diapers he has to be sure he is getting as much milk without the shield as he was with the shield.

You may encourage your baby to breastfeed without the nipple shield by providing more skin-to-skin contact in between feedings. At feeding times, let him nurse with the shield until his initial hunger is eased and then try to remove the shield and offer your bare breast. Use your knowledge of your baby's likes and dislikes to discover a way that works for you. Be patient. Babies stop using nipple shields when they don't need them any more.

The decisions you make about using a nipple shield will be as individual as you are. If your baby is having trouble learning to breastfeed, you will especially appreciate the company of other mothers interested in breastfeeding. You can meet other breastfeeding mothers at local La Leche League meetings. To find a La Leche League Group near you, look in your local phone book, call LLLI at 800-LA LECHE or 847-519-7730, or check on our Web site at www.lalecheleague.org/WebIndex.html

RESOURCES

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