

Breastfeeding patterns

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Maternal confidence regarding breastfeeding has a positive effect on breastfeeding duration. Unrealistic or uninformed expectations of normal breastfeeding patterns are likely to undermine the confidence of breastfeeding mothers. This may lead to a perception of inadequate milk supply and increase the likelihood of the mothers giving supplementary feeds or ceasing breastfeeding. It is essential that clinicians and mothers have evidence-based information on normal breastfeeding patterns that can be used to inspire or reinforce the confidence of breastfeeding mothers.

We analyzed 24-h test-weigh data and have shown that normal healthy infants, 1 to 6 months old, exclusively breastfed on cue have between 4 and 13 breastfeeding sessions per day. Each breastfeeding session can comprise of a feed from one breast, both breasts, or a cluster of feeds when the infant feeds again from the first breast. The breastfeeding session lasts 12 to 67 minutes, and during that time the infants consume 54 to 234 mL of milk. This results in a total daily milk intake of 478 to 1298 ml, and in the majority of mothers the total intake from one breast is significantly higher than from the other. Night breastfeeds are common and make an important contribution to the total daily milk intake. Infants feed to appetite and consume 43-92% of the milk available in the breast at the beginning of the breastfeed. The fat content of the milk is 22 to 62 g/L and the total daily fat intake is independent of breastfeeding frequency.

We have also shown that the changes in breastfeeding patterns that a mother can expect during 6 months of exclusive breastfeeding are: a decrease in the frequency of breastfeeding sessions after 1 month, a decrease in the duration of breastfeeding sessions after 2 months, an increase in the average amount of milk taken during a breastfeeding session after 1 month, and an increase in the longest interval between breastfeeding sessions after 1 month. However, the total daily milk intake remains constant between 1 and 6 months.

Mothers should feel reassured if their breastfed infant is alert, growing and has sufficient wet diapers and stools, and their breastfeeding patterns fall within these

ranges. However, many mothers still want to know how much milk their breastfeeding infant is consuming. We assessed mothers' breastfeeding confidence before and after measuring their milk production by 24-h test-weighing. Of 76 mothers initially confident in their breastfeeding 72 remained confident after receiving their results, and only 4 lost confidence. These 4 had milk production towards the lower limit of normal. Of 29 mothers initially not confident in their breastfeeding, 18 gained confidence. Of the 11 still not confident, 6 had low or low-normal milk production. When there is a perception of low milk production, 24-h test-weighing can either reassure the mother, or provide a diagnostic tool that can guide the health professional to assist the mother to increase her milk production.