

## **“What is normal when it comes to breastfeeding?”**

(Presenting, within the theme, “Latest recommendations for research based practice”)

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Researchers have demonstrated that normal, healthy, exclusively breastfeeding mothers and infants show a wide range in breastfeeding behaviour. A breastfeeding session can be a feed from one or two breasts, or even a cluster of feeds when the infant goes back to the first breast after finishing on the second. Some infants (30%) always feed from one breast only during a breastfeeding session, a minority (13%) always feed from both breasts during each breastfeeding session, while the majority (57%) sometimes feed from one breast and sometimes from both breasts, or take a cluster of feeds. <sup>1</sup>

A cross-sectional study showed that between one and six months after birth there are between 4 and 13 breastfeeding sessions each day. Each breastfeeding session lasts 12 to 67 minutes, and during that time the infants consume, on average, 54 to 234 mL of milk. This results in a total daily milk intake of between 478 and 1356 mL. <sup>1</sup>

A longitudinal study was carried out to determine if the variation was due to differences in infant age. Indeed, between one and three months there was a decrease in both the average frequency of breastfeeding sessions (from 7.6 to 6.6 per day), and the average duration of each breastfeeding session (from 36 to 29 minutes), and a concomitant increase in the average amount of milk consumed (from 106 to 126 mL). Between three and six months the frequency and amount of milk consumed during each breastfeeding session remained constant, while the duration of each breastfeeding session decreased to 23 minutes. However, during the whole of the period of exclusive breastfeeding from one to six months the total amount of milk consumed each day remained constant, with an average of 808 mL. <sup>2</sup>

Despite the observed changes in breastfeeding behaviour between 1 and 3 months of lactation, there was still a wide range in each measured parameter at each age, such that at one to two months there were between 5 and 12 breastfeeding sessions of between 47 and 199 mL each, and at four to six months there were between 4 and 11 breastfeeding sessions of between 57 and 245 mL each. This breastfeeding behaviour resulted in a 24-hour intake of breast milk of between 476 and 1370 mL. <sup>2</sup>

This variation in breastfeeding behaviour contrasts with recommendations for formula feeding, that 5 – 6 bottles of 120 – 150 mL are offered at one to two months, and 4 – 5 bottles of 180 – 250 mL are offered at four to six months. Parents need to be reassured that variations in breastfeeding behaviour that are outside the ranges of recommendations for formula feeding are not indications of breastfeeding problems, and they should have the confidence to continue exclusive breastfeeding.

**References:**

1. Kent JC, Mitoulas LR, Cregan MD, Ramsay DT, Doherty DA, Hartmann PE. Volume and frequency of breastfeedings and fat content of breast milk throughout the day. *Pediatrics*. 2006;117(3):e387-395.
2. Kent JC, Hepworth AR, Sherriff JL, Cox DB, Mitoulas LR, Hartmann PE. Longitudinal changes in breastfeeding patterns from 1 to 6 months of lactation. *Breastfeed Med*. 2013;8:401-407.