

Food Sensitivities and Breastfeeding Babies

Most mothers can eat a wide variety of foods without their babies reacting to foods which pass into their breastmilk. However, there is a chance that your baby may be sensitive to a food that does not cause you a problem. There is limited research on what foods cause problems in breastfed babies. Based on years of working with breastfeeding mothers, the lactation consultants at MilkWorks have developed the following information.

Symptoms of a food sensitivity in a breastfed baby may include: skin rashes (especially on the face), spitting up (reflux), watery stools, fussiness, a lot of gas (which can be foul-smelling), stools with mucus or blood in them, very infrequent stools, or respiratory congestion. However, these symptoms do not always mean that a baby has a food sensitivity, but affected babies usually have more than one.

A baby can also be fussy for other reasons, such as not getting enough milk, or getting too much. If a mother has a very high milk supply, her baby may be more prone to some gut irritation and can exhibit some of the same symptoms. It may be helpful to address an abundant milk supply before suspecting a food sensitivity. Massaging the breasts well before feedings and softening one side well before offering the second breast may help. (Refer to our **Abundant Milk Supply** hand out for more information.)

In our experience, the most common foods in a mother's diet that appear to cause sensitivity reactions in a breastfed baby are: **cow's milk and dairy products, soy products, beef, corn, wheat and eggs.** The offending food is often one that a mother consumes in large quantities and/or at least daily.

Since dairy is by far the most common cause, **most mothers will start by avoiding "obvious dairy"**. This includes milk, cream, cheese, yogurt, ice cream, sour cream and butter. **You should see some improvement within 48-72 hours, but it may take two full weeks for symptoms to clear completely.** Some mothers find they must avoid "all" dairy, which is more difficult because dairy is present in many processed foods. This requires "reading labels" to avoid cow's milk. Many babies are not this sensitive. Babies who are sensitive to dairy are not lactose (carbohydrate) intolerant. They are reacting to the cow's milk protein. (Refer to our **Milk Ingredients** handout for more information.)

If you are avoiding dairy and/or soy, you may eat all fruits and vegetables, meats (although some mothers may need to avoid beef for a while), fish, poultry, eggs, nuts breads, cereals, potatoes, rice, pasta, oils and sugars. They may be prepared raw or cooked, as long as they are prepared without butter or milk or a cow's milk or soy additive. Processed cold cuts or seasoned packages of rice may have powdered milk additives. Rice, coconut or almond "milks" may be used in recipes or in place of cow's milk or soymilk. **A calcium supplement is likely necessary (1,000 mg/day for breastfeeding women is recommended).**

If avoiding dairy and soy does not seem to help, you may want to keep a food and symptom diary. Record the time of day you consume all food and drinks as well as any symptoms your baby has. Babies will **usually show their symptom(s) within a few hours (one to six)** of when their mother eats an offending food. An "elimination diet" (when a mother eliminates all but a small list of foods) is not



generally recommended. A baby may improve briefly, but often then starts to react to one of the few foods that you ARE eating in large amounts. It is also important for you to consume a variety of nutritious food for your health and well-being. You may want to meet with a dietitian if you find you need to avoid several different foods, to be sure your dietary needs are met.

Once you do determine what is bothering your baby, **avoid that food for around two months, and then try eating again to see if your baby has outgrown the problem.**

Roughly half of babies will outgrow a cow's milk sensitivity by one year; 75% by two years and 90% by three years. When you DO decide to "test" your baby by reintroducing a food to see if they have outgrown their sensitivity, please be aware that **once your baby's gut has healed from the irritation, it can take two to three days of exposure to the sensitive food to see a reaction in your baby.**

Probiotics are being studied in infants and some parents are choosing to use them to promote good gut health in their baby and decrease symptoms of a food sensitivity (Additional information is available in our **Probiotic** handout). We encourage parents to consider soothing techniques, such as **wearing your baby and infant massage**. It is also important that you take good care of yourself by getting some exercise. Do not be afraid to ask for help with your baby, as you may need a break. Some babies are more demanding and do not calm as easily, and this can be difficult if your baby also has a food sensitivity. You may also want to consider **attending a breastfeeding mother's group at MilkWorks** for more support.

If a baby does not appear to respond to the elimination of certain foods from his or her mother's diet, some mothers may opt to try a **"pre-digested" (or hypo-allergenic) cow's milk formula**, such as Alimentum, Nutramigen, or Pepticate. The cow's milk protein is broken down further in these formulas in order for a baby to digest it more easily. **90-95% of cow's milk sensitive babies will improve** on a hypo-allergenic formula. **For babies with severe symptoms who do not improve, there are "elemental" formulas**, such as EleCare, Neocate, Vivonex or Puramino. These are dairy and soy free and are made from individual amino acids. Nearly all babies can tolerate these, except for babies who are sensitive to corn. For babies who are sensitive to corn, Alimentum ready-to-feed (not concentrated or powder) contains no corn products at all. Similac Advance powder has no corn, but a lot of cow's milk protein. Pepticate uses maltodextrin, which is more "broken down" than corn syrup solids, so some corn sensitive babies might tolerate it better. Formula companies make changes frequently! If corn is a concern, please read labels to see if corn syrup solids, dextrose, maltodextrin or dextrans are in the list of ingredients. As with diet changes while breastfeeding, wait 3 days on any new formula to decide if there has been improvement or worsening of symptoms.

Reviewed: July 2023