

Sleeping Through The Night

Our culture really values sleeping babies. It seems it is a milestone for babies to “sleep through the night”. Everyone enjoys a good night’s sleep, and it is natural to want that as soon as possible!

Many women cannot go more than 5 hours without removing milk in the first 6 months and maintain enough milk production for their baby.

Why not?

It helps to understand what regulates milk production. As soon as milk “comes in” after birth, the amount of production is controlled mostly by 2 things- prolactin hormone levels and milk removal.

- **Prolactin hormone** rises throughout pregnancy and reaches its peak on the day the baby is born. It immediately starts to fall, as the “half-life” is short – only 2 hours. (This means in 2 hours the blood level decreases by half) Prolactin is released every time the nipple is stimulated by nursing or expressing milk. It is no accident that most newborns are eating at least every 2-3 hours at first- this keeps that prolactin up there! When a baby starts sleeping more than 5 hours at a time, the prolactin may fall too far to maintain enough production.
- **Milk removal** is also essential to continued production. There are inhibitors in the milk itself that tell the milk-making cells to slow down. The longer milk is sitting near those cells, the more they are told to slow production. A breast does NOT have to feel “full” of milk to be “down-regulating”.

Why can some women easily go 8+ hours early on and NOT have trouble with production, and others cannot?

- Some breasts have **more milk-making tissue and more storage capacity** in the ducts than others. They seem to be able to maintain enough milk production despite going long periods without stimulating prolactin release or removing milk. We do not understand why there is such a wide variation in storage capacity, but there is.
- Many women get their **menstrual cycle** back when their baby is going more than 5 hours between the start of one feeding to the start of the next, and the fluctuating hormone levels associated with periods can decrease milk production.

Can ALL lactating parents go 5 hours from the start of one feeding to the start of the next and not see a decrease in production?

- **No.** Everyone has a unique storage capacity. For example, if the breasts can only hold 3 oz at one time combined, and the 6-week-old baby is eating an average of 24 oz a day, that is 1oz/hour of production. If the breasts are full in 3 hours, they cannot make more until that milk is removed, and they will make somewhat less the next night.



What can I do to increase low milk production if my baby is sleeping more than 5 hours?

- You can try a “**dream feed**”- commonly, baby will go down for the night a few hours before, so you can quietly offer a breast or two without waking them when it is time for you to go to bed.
- You can **set an alarm** for halfway through the anticipated time the baby will sleep and offer the breast then or just pump to drain both sides without waking baby.
- **See an IBCLC** to look for other reasons your production has decreased.

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