

# **Low Milk Supply in the NICU - Kay Needles RN, BSN, IBCLC**

## **Common causes of low milk supply**

### **Things we CANNOT change**

- **Age** - Hormone shifts in women over 35 can affect milk production
- **Breast trauma/surgery** - May have damaged nerve pathways or milk-making tissue in breast
- **Medical problems** - Anemia, Diabetes, Placental insufficiency, Thyroid dysfunction, PCOS, Infertility, Edema/swelling in breasts
- **Sheehans syndrome** - Severe bleeding post-partum reduces blood flow to pituitary gland which affects milk production

### **Things we CAN change**

#### **Medications/Herbs**

- Wellbutrin (Zyban, Bupropion) - antidepressant
- Pseudoephedrine (cold/allergy medicines)
- Alcohol
- Nicotine
- Sage, Parsley, Peppermint
- Hormones (Birth control, PCOS, infertility)

#### **Pumping concerns**

- Late start pumping – not enough Prolactin receptors created in early days
- Not pumping enough times/long enough - leaves milk in breasts which sets up negative feedback loop telling breasts to make less milk
  - Visitor syndrome
  - >6hrs between pumping
- Not using enough suction

## Strategies to increase supply

### Environment

- Are you pumping in a place that is relaxing and private with some music or the TV playing softly? Do you have your supplies, your phone, a magazine, and a drink close by? Have someone give you a foot/shoulder rub.
- Visualization – Do you have photos/video of your baby, blanket with baby's smell, lovey (object you associate with your baby)
- Conditioning – routines help with letdown/relaxation. Have you established a pumping routine?



**What else could this mom do to help with her milk supply?**

### Pumping

- Massage/compression- before/during/after pumping
- Hand expression- some moms get better results hand-expressing
- Warm compresses/bath/shower- stimulates letdown and relaxes you. Don't forget to have some bottles close by to catch your milk
- Hospital grade pump
  - Pumps both sides at same time
  - Used/borrowed pumps may lose efficiency over time
- Flanges-Do they fit?
  - Ask a Lactation Consultant to check. Nipples can change, especially during prolonged pumping.
- Increase the number of times a day that you are pumping
  - -Keep a log/phone app. Set an alarm. Track pump sessions/volume/questions
  - -Visitor syndrome
    - Well-meaning visitors can lose track of time and not realize that you need to pump. Don't be afraid to excuse yourself. Have a gatekeeper who can limit visitors. Ask visitors to take care of mundane tasks (shopping, cleaning, laundry, meals) so you can focus on taking care of yourself and your baby

- Power pumping
  - Set aside an hour. Massage your breasts for 10 mins,
  - pump for 10 mins, rest for 10 mins, pump for 10 mins, rest for 10 mins, and pump for 10 mins. A total of 3 pump sessions in 1hr
- Increase length of pumping session
  - Add 3-5 mins to each session (also pumps hindmilk)
- Increase pump pressure
  - Be gentle, do not hurt yourself
- Are you going more than 6 hrs at night without pumping?
  - Pump last thing at night and first thing in the morning
  - Take an afternoon nap

### **Skin to skin care (Kangaroo Care)**

- Baby is placed on your bare chest dressed only in diaper and hat. Covered with blanket.
- Can be started as soon as baby is stable in the NICU. Ask baby's nurse/doctor
- Releases Oxytocin (mothering hormone) that stimulates milk production
- Helps baby gain weight
- Helps you get to know your baby
- Can be done by dad too

### **Nutrition**

- Are you eating a well-balanced diet with plenty of protein and fruits/veggies?
- Are you taking in enough fluids?
- Different cultures provide many suggestions for helping with milk production. Try adding some to your diet.
- Ayurvedic- almonds, coconut, sesame seeds, rice pudding, pumpkin, sunflower seeds
- Chinese- chicken/seaweed soups, cooked papaya, millet, rice, anise, fennel, dill, cumin, caraway, Ginger, lettuce, barley, oats, chickpeas
- Mexican – atole (Maize-based pudding)
- European – Barley water, Ovaltine
- N. America- Oatmeal (steelcut/rolled), alcohol-free beer (polysaccharides in barley stimulate milk supply, not alcohol)
- Herbs- Alfalfa (not with lupus), Anise, Blessed Thistle, Borage Oil, Caraway, Chasteberry (in low doses if low supply due to hormone imbalance), Dandelion, Dill seed, Fennel, Fenugreek (not in thyroid disease), Goat's rue, Marshmallow root, Milk thistle, Nettle, Oat straw, Red clover blossoms, Red raspberry, Saw Palmetto, Shatavari, Vervain
- Teas- Mother's Milk Tea etc.
  - Combination of herbs
  - Brew 5-10mins
  - Make large batch to sip on through the day
- Tinctures/capsules – Vitamica, TTK Lactara, Motherlove

### **Medications (Always check with baby's MD)**

- Off-label (prescribed for other conditions, not FDA-approved as galactogogues)
  - Domperidone (Motilium) – Treats GI issues. Not available in US
  - Metoclopramide (Reglan) – increased risk of post-partum depression
  - Metformin (Glucophage) – used to treat PCOS. May cause GI issues
- Synthetic Oxytocin – stimulates letdown

### **Non-traditional medicine**

- Chiropractor- to correct history of subluxation, upper torso injury/surgery
- Acupuncture/Acupressure/Refluxology/Homeopathy
- Yoga - ?arm movements ?relaxation

### **Coping strategies**

- One feed/pumping session/day at a time
- Set short/small goals – keep it manageable
- Organize play-dates for siblings (in other people's homes)
- Fast forward to beyond the NICU days. Think about your baby as a toddler/preschooler/teenager
- Confront feelings – frustration, anger, guilt, fear, regret, inadequacy, selfishness, being judged, lonely, hurtful remarks, overwhelmed, depressed
- Find a confidante – another mom going through the same journey, a Hand to Hold volunteer, a close friend/partner/family member

**ACCEPT SUCCESS – any milk you pump for your baby is  
better than no milk. Pat yourself on the back for a  
job well done during your NICU journey**

## Resources

*The Breastfeeding Mothers Guide to Making More Milk.* Diana West and Lisa Marasco

*Mother Food.* Hilary Jacobsen (Lactogenic cookbook). [www.mother-food.com](http://www.mother-food.com)

[www.mobimotherhood.org](http://www.mobimotherhood.org)

[www.lowmilksupply.org](http://www.lowmilksupply.org)

[www.wisewomanherbals.com](http://www.wisewomanherbals.com)

[www.motherlove.com](http://www.motherlove.com)

[www.naturesway.com](http://www.naturesway.com)

Lactation Consultants

- Find a Hospital-based LC
- Find a community-based LC at

<http://www.hmhbcentx.net/resources/lactation-consultants/>