

BREASTFED BABIES AND CONSTIPATION

People used to think that breastfed babies never got constipated – we know now that this is not the case. Constipation is certainly uncommon in breastfed babies, but it does happen.

Breastfed babies may poo several times a day, especially in the first few weeks of life. After a month or so the frequency may reduce; they may go a few days without having their bowels open. Sometimes this is OK – breast milk is such a perfect food for babies that there might not be much waste.

In order to decide whether or not it is OK to poo infrequently, we have to look at the *whole child* – and not just their poo! Some things that would suggest constipation in a baby would be:

- Reluctance to feed when they have not done a poo for a couple of days, then being hungry again once they have had their bowels open.
- Appearing to have an uncomfortable tummy, relieved by doing a poo.
- Passing a LARGE quantity of poo all at once. Even if it is soft/runny, storing up a large quantity of poo means that the lower bowel has been stretched, and this is not good for any baby.
- Disturbed sleep, crying, drawing knees up, stretching legs out, straining, distended tummy ...relieved by doing a big poo.

The first thing to do is to check the breast feeding – it may be that the baby is not getting enough milk. The midwife and/or health visitor should be asked for advice, and there are several breastfeeding organisations – see websites below.

If constipation does need to be treated, breastfed babies can be treated just the same as any other child following the *NICE Guidelines*, which suggest using macrogol laxatives like Movicol or CosmoCol. HOWEVER, since these come in the form of a powder which have to be mixed with water they may not be ideal for breastfed babies, because:

- The baby's tummy may be full up after drinking the macrogol water, so they might not feed properly.

- It may be very difficult to get the baby to drink from a bottle/cup if they are exclusively breastfed.
- They may not like the taste of the macrogol water – Mum may be able to express some breast milk to flavour it to encourage the baby to take it.

Alternative treatments would be:

- A different oral laxative, such as Lactulose or Senna.
- A small Glycerine Suppository.

In order to decide which is the best treatment for their baby, parents will need to see their GP and/or health visitor.

Further information on breastfeeding is available from:

- National Childbirth Trust (NCT) – www.nct.org.uk – see particularly www.nct.org.uk/parenting/constipation-babies
- La Leche League (LLL) – www.laleche.org.uk
- Association of Breastfeeding Mothers (ABM) – www.abm.me.uk
- The Breastfeeding Network (BfN) - www.breastfeedingnetwork.org.uk
- National Infant Feeding Network (NIFN) – www.unicef.org.uk/BabyFriendly
- National Breastfeeding Helpline - 0300 100 0212