



When a Medical Emergency Becomes a Feeding Emergency

By Julia M. Chiarella-Genoni

Breastfeeding went very well with my first son. Aside from bouts of mastitis, nursing him was wonderful. It was a time just for us, where we felt connected and at peace. I never felt rushed or fed up; I enjoyed the time we had together and before I knew it, we were done. At about ten months old, he weaned himself off nursing and easily went to a bottle and different foods.

So when I knew I was having twins, I researched all the tips and tricks to nurse two babies, and possibly two babies at once. There were loads of suggestions in my collection of pregnancy books, so I gathered as much information as I could and was prepared for the challenge. My baby boys were born prematurely, so they were unable to suck on their own for the first few days. This meant they were

fed my pumped breast milk through feeding tubes that went in their noses and down to their stomachs. It was very difficult to watch them in that state, but the NICU nurses assured me that they would soon be able to nurse without the tubes.

Once they got their breathing figured out and were getting stronger, I was able to visit them in the NICU and breastfeed them there in a nursing room. It wasn't the same calm and relaxed feeling I had with my first son, but I was determined to give them as much as I could, especially since they were not at home with us and could only see me for short periods of time. My routine for two weeks consisted of pumping as much milk as I could at night and delivering it in the morning to the NICU.

Then I would nurse each of my babies and reluctantly go home without them. When I returned home, I had my two-year-old son to enjoy and take care of. However, this routine changed after two weeks when one of the twins was discharged.

Only one.

I had to adjust myself to nurse one twin at home, then pump for my other twin and deliver that milk to the NICU and nurse him in the morning when I got there. The hospital was far, and the routine was starting to take its toll on me. But I kept going, because that's what we have to do as mothers, right?

After four weeks, my second twin was discharged from the NICU and we were all home together at last. Our little family of five was complete; I was so exhausted but oh, so happy. I continued to pump because they were nursing in small intervals and sometimes I would give my husband, mother or sister a bottle to feed one twin while I nursed the other. Most times, however, I tried to nurse them together. It was tricky at first to get them to settle in place on the giant double nursing pillow I had, but the three of us figured out a comfortable position and managed to have a pretty good session together.

Now, as every mother knows, the first months of motherhood are all about survival mode. There is so much to do all the time. You run on very little sleep and nursing truly does take so much out of you. Nursing twins seemed to take double out of me. A few months into breastfeeding my twins, my body gave out on me. The stress of a caesarean birth, nursing both around the clock and taking care of my toddler caused me to have a medical emergency.

I remember the feeling that came over me. A side of my face went numb and then an arm went numb too. I felt strange, half asleep, more than just over-tired. Luckily, I wasn't home alone; my mother was there, and she suggested I go to the hospital. I called an emergency line to be certain this was indeed necessary, and sure enough, they sent over an ambulance for me. They wanted me to be seen immediately.

When I left the house in the ambulance, so did the twins' feeding supply; the only breast milk that was in the home was a small amount that I had pumped, and that would

be gone in a matter of hours. I was so stressed about them not having their milk from me that I almost didn't care what was going on with my health. Luckily, I had my family to help pitch in, and they quickly made a grocery run for some powdered formula, but it made me realize I wasn't prepared in an emergency to feed my babies.

The truth of the matter was in the end my twins and my toddler were all okay. They were being looked after by my husband and my mother. There was food for them, just not mine. I had to shift my mind to figure out what this emergency meant for me. After hours and hours of testing, the doctors that studied my file concluded I should be followed up to see if I had the onset of multiple sclerosis. It was a very scary time of waiting and hoping for answers. After over a year of MRI exams and appointments with a neurologist, it was determined that there was nothing further developed in the grey lesions of my brain, and my episode was chalked up to exhaustion.

Exhaustion. While nursing my preemie twins and taking care of my toddler? Imagine that!

My body physically shouted out to me that I needed to take it down a notch so I could take care of myself and my children. So, dear parents, how can you take care of yourself in anticipation of any potential emergency?

Prep Your Supplies

You may have heard how nice it is to receive food such as prepared casseroles when you are a new parent. Having a ready supply of food you don't need to prepare yourself is a godsend. Now think of the equivalent of that for your baby (or babies). Before you return home from your hospital stay, you will have decorated a baby room, assembled a crib and bought clothes for your bundle of joy. Include baby bottles (borrowed or bought), powdered formula and various nipple sizes for the bottles. As well, have various pacifiers on hand. Even though you may not ever want to use these items, having them on hand just in case is a treasure. Once you've established breastfeeding, you can begin to pump and freeze milk for the future. Aim to have a few days' supply on hand.

Variety is Key

Some babies have a hard time adjusting from breastfeeding to a bottle. In the case of my twin preemies, they had no

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choice but to have feedings from NICU nurses while they were still in the hospital. When I became sick, they had no choice but to accept powdered formula when I was away in the hospital.

If you have a friend or family member helping you out to feed your baby, some changes in how they feed can help your baby adjust. If your baby always breastfeeds with you in one room or one position, have your helper try a different place and a different position. Changing the lighting in a room can also help. If the various bottles and nipples are not working, try a syringe, a spoon or even your finger to get them trying this new milk. Variety can also be in the time of day that you feed your baby. When your baby is starting to show signs of sleepiness, it's a good time to introduce a bottle since they naturally like to suck when they are tired. Babies may resist the transition at first. Keep calm and keep trying.

Reminders of Mama

Some babies only want their mother's touch and smell when feeding. Give your helper a blanket or shirt that you have kept on you when nursing that will have your scent to help comfort your baby. The temperature of the pumped milk or formula should be close to room

temperature or slightly warmer, similar to your own breast milk. Generally, breastfed babies take a slow flow nipple from a bottle because it mimics the output of breast milk. However, if you know you have a strong letdown, your baby might need a fast nipple flow, so having a few different baby bottle nipples to try may be helpful.

Don't Worry About the Amount of Milk Per Feeding

Your baby might take less milk without you. That's okay. As long as your baby is gaining weight and having normal stools and urination for their age, they are getting enough to eat. Things that can help with getting enough milk include shorter feeding sessions, distractions while feeding, feeding before they are really hungry so it's not too stressful and even playing with a pacifier or bottle when not feeding to get used to those items.

Help For Your Help

Lactation consultants in your area can also be a great resource for you and your helpers. Getting an expert to guide you in this transition can make a big difference. You might also have a milk donor service in your area if you're looking for that instead of formula.

Taking these extra steps before your baby is home can potentially help you when something difficult arises. That way if you are faced with a medical emergency, you won't have the added stress of how to feed your baby as well. **B**

**Information tips for bottle feeding your baby taken from Certified Lactation Educator (and a mother of twins), Stacey Stewart of Milkology.org*

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