

# WHAT BREASTFEEDING IS REALLY LIKE

By Ellie Krieger, RD / Photography by Michel Meunier

ONE WOMAN'S STORY  
OF GETTING THROUGH  
THE FIRST TOUGH WEEKS

**A**s a nutritionist who has counseled clients on the benefits of breastfeeding, I had always looked forward to the experience. Food and love are deeply linked for me, so naturally I imagined nursing would be the ultimate gratification: my

very own body providing the absolute healthiest food for my baby.

I never suspected I would hate it. During the first weeks at home with my baby, I thought hourly about quitting and just aimed to get through each day. I felt utterly trapped and frustrated. There was nothing warm and fuzzy about it.

However, here I am ten months later still nursing, and I can even say I like it. The experience has been quite an eye-opener. The truth is that nursing can be—and, according to other moms, most often is—a struggle at first, physically and emotionally. But the good news is eventually breastfeeding does get easier, and then becomes a true pleasure.

## An 18-Hour-a-Day Job

It all started out just fine. My daughter Isabella latched on beautifully and seemed to have a knack for sucking. But after a while that became the very problem—she nursed constantly. When I was pregnant, my friend and lactation consultant, Minna Kapp, warned me that breastfeeding a newborn takes up 18 hours a day: “It’s the most demanding job a woman can have,” she said. I shrugged this off at the time. But reality hit hard as I became one with the sofa, sitting there hour after hour, day and night, stuck with a baby on my breast.

Each of Isabella’s feedings lasted about 40 minutes and she demanded to be fed every hour and a half. If you do the math, that gave me less than an hour at a stretch to take care of anything else. I could barely meet my own basic needs—sleeping, going to the



# I BECAME ONE WITH THE SOFA, SITTING HOUR AFTER HOUR, STUCK WITH A BABY ON MY BREAST.

bathroom, showering, getting dressed, or preparing a simple meal. As a nutritionist I was used to eating well, and I could barely get up to scramble myself an egg.

My poor husband, Thom, had to be at my beck and call: "Refill my water glass, empty the dishwasher, burp cloth please, go get these groceries." It was all I could do not to bark orders at him.

I tried to gain a bit of free time by pumping so Thom could give Isabella a bottle, but that went horribly. You should have seen me—in tears and exhausted, hooked up to a breast pump in the sliver of time between nursings, eeking out a sole ounce of milk, if I was lucky.

Breastfeeding was also scary in the beginning because I was literally afraid I was starving my child. I couldn't quantify how much Isabella was getting—and I worried that it wasn't enough. She never seemed satisfied, even when she had just

finished eating. I felt inadequate and nervous that I didn't have enough milk for her. However, there is some solace in the diaper pail. Kapp told me as long as a baby is dirtying enough diapers—two to five poopy ones (that's a technical term) and five to six wet ones each day after the fourth day of life—she is getting enough food. Your baby is also doing fine if she's gaining four to seven ounces a week. But you only visit the pediatrician for weigh-ins every two to four weeks, which leaves plenty of time for anxiety to set in.

## Building Support


After about a month, my uncertainty and frustration led me to a breastfeeding support group. The room was overflowing with women and their babies, each with a different breastfeeding issue to work through—from problems with latching on to questions about diet. I got to air my

## YOUR BREAST FRIENDS


THE KEY TO SURVIVING THE FIRST FEW MONTHS OF BREASTFEEDING IS HAVING SUPPORT. HERE'S HOW TO GET IT:

- 1. Find a lactation consultant.** A lactation consultant provides instruction for women in preparation for or during breastfeeding. Among other things, she can help with technique, positioning, breast care, and nutrition counseling. Request to meet with one at your hospital, ask your obstetrician to refer you to a certified consultant, or find one through the International Lactation Consultant Association ([ilca.org](http://ilca.org) or 919-787-5181).
- 2. Join a support group.** Other nursing mothers can be a great source of inspiration, information, and camaraderie. Ask your lactation consultant if she holds support groups. Also get breastfeeding help or a referral to a group from La Leche League ([lalecheleague.org](http://lalecheleague.org) or 1-800-LALECHE).
- 3. Get your partner involved.** Make sure your partner knows he is an essential part of making breastfeeding work. Tell him specifically what he can do to enable you to nurse more easily, such as preparing meals and grocery shopping, keeping the house tidy, and, especially, giving you emotional support.
- 4. Rally family and friends.** When loved ones come to visit, ask them to bring groceries or prepared food or to do a load of laundry. Most people are searching for ways to be helpful and will be glad you asked.

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feelings about being chained to the sofa, and gathered tips on how to make Isabella a more efficient eater. I learned that I should let her drain the first breast completely before switching so she would receive more of the calorie-rich "hind" milk produced at the end of a feeding. And if I made Isabella open her mouth wider when she latched on, she could get more of my breast and pump the milk out more effectively. I also got to weigh her on a professional scale, exhaling with relief when I saw she had gained a few precious ounces.

In addition to the advice from the support group, Thom began to give Isabella one bottle of formula at night, at Kapp's suggestion. Ideally, we would have used pumped breast milk; still, this arrangement enabled me to get a luxurious three hours of sleep, and let Thom

## THE BEST PART NOW IS THE COCOON-LIKE CLOSENESS I FEEL WHEN ISABELLA IS NURSING.

be involved with feeding Isabella.

Most lactation consultants frown on supplementing with formula and suggest it as a last resort. They warn that your milk supply will suffer. Also, the official recommendation from the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Dietetic Association is to breastfeed exclusively for six months. But Kapp has seen her share of overwhelmed mothers: "One four-ounce bottle in a 24-hour period will not hurt your milk supply. In fact, the extra rest could help increase it and prevent you from giving up breastfeeding." It did just that for me.

### A Major Motivator

Another thing that pushed me to continue nursing was good old-fashioned guilt. As a nutritionist I know well all the benefits of breastfeeding. Breastfed babies have a reduced risk of asthma, allergies, SIDS, obesity, colds, and infections. There are pluses for moms, too, including quicker weight loss and protection against cancer and osteoporosis.

Women hear so much about these benefits that they can become plagued with guilt and feelings of inadequacy if nursing doesn't work for them. But I've decided a little guilt isn't necessarily a bad thing. It can motivate you to take

## NURSING KNOW-HOW

HAVING A HARD TIME GETTING THE HANG OF BREASTFEEDING? TAKE OUR QUIZ TO FIND OUT HOW MUCH YOU KNOW ABOUT MOTHER'S MILK—THE ANSWERS MAY HELP YOU TROUBLESHOOT OR AT LEAST BONE UP ON WHAT MAKES BREASTFEEDING SO GOOD FOR YOUR BABY.

**1) There are, at minimum, how many ingredients in breast milk that aren't found in formula?**

- a) 2
- b) 15
- c) 50
- d) 100

**2) To get baby to open wide for the latch-on:**

- a) use your index finger to press down firmly on baby's chin
- b) brush baby's lower lip with your nipple
- c) tickle baby's nose
- d) a and b

**3) Baby has a good latch when:**

- a) just the nipple is in his mouth
- b) much of your areola is

in baby's mouth  
c) baby's cheeks dimple while he's sucking  
d) your breast hurts

**4) The first thin, yellow milk you produce after baby is born:**

- a) isn't enough for a newborn to survive on
- b) contains important antibodies
- c) may give baby jaundice
- d) all of the above

**5) The "hind" milk released later in a feeding:**

- a) is high in fat
- b) makes babies feel full
- c) helps babies gain weight
- d) all of the above

**6) If you have small breasts:**

- a) you'll produce less milk
- b) you may have a harder time with positioning and latch-on
- c) you may have an easier time with positioning and latch-on
- d) none of the above

**7) If you hear baby slurping, it means:**

- a) he likes your milk
- b) he's a good eater
- c) he's not latched on correctly
- d) he is latched on correctly

**8) After the first week, your baby is getting enough milk if:**

- a) she has five to six wet diapers and two to five poopy diapers a day
- b) your breasts feel soft after a feeding
- c) she's gaining four to seven ounces a week
- d) all of the above

**9) Your breasts are rock hard and painful.**

**The best remedy for this engorgement is to:**

- a) breastfeed more
- b) breastfeed less
- c) stop nursing and give your baby formula
- d) take a cold shower

**10) Refrigerated, these vegetable leaves can relieve engorgement when placed in your bra:**

- a) spinach
- b) cabbage
- c) arugula
- d) kale

**11) How long does the American Academy of Pediatrics recommend that women breastfeed?**

- a) three months
- b) six months
- c) one year
- d) two years

**Answers:** 1) d 2) d 3) b  
4) b 5) d 6) c 7) c 8) d 9) a  
10) b 11) c

the rougher road because it's the right thing to do. Since it's my official responsibility as a dietitian to support breastfeeding, I would have felt horrible if I hadn't given it my all. And I'm glad I did, because the big payoff was just ahead.

### The Turning Point

After six weeks, my feelings of entrapment and anxiety eased. I had gotten Isabella to eat more efficiently—it now took her only 30 minutes a feeding. A visit to the doctor confirmed that she was thriving. It also dawned on me that time on the sofa belly-to-belly with my baby wasn't so bad after all. Perhaps it was something I should savor.

By the time Isabella was 3 months old, I felt confident and comfortable nursing. She could go two hours between feedings and would nurse to satisfaction in about 15 minutes. I also started pumping again—this time successfully—so I could get a haircut or do some work while Thom or the nanny gave her a bottle.

But the best part is the cocoon-like closeness I feel when Isabella is on my



breast. Since she is now eating solid food, I only nurse her a few times a day, but I look forward to each time when the rest of the world blurs and it's only us two.

It seems like there's a conspiracy to keep the struggles of breastfeeding a secret. Health professionals don't want to talk about it because they fear it will deter you from trying. But I think it's better to arm yourself with the truth. While more women are starting out breastfeeding (about 70 percent), fewer than a third are nursing at the six-month mark.

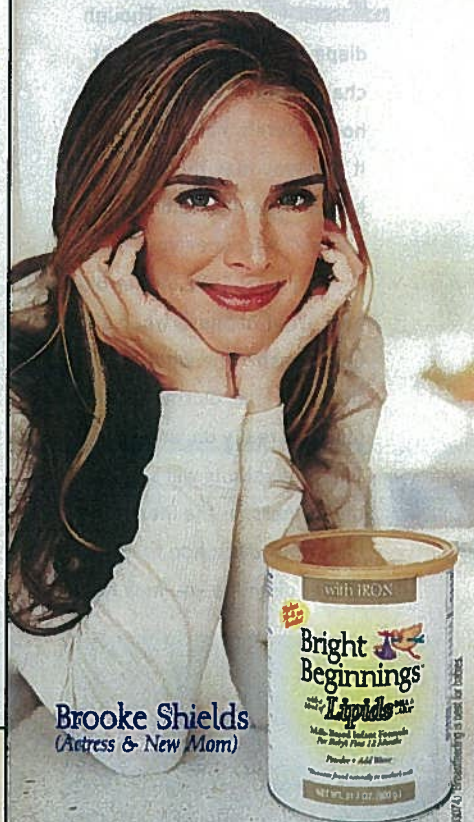
So, ladies, let me tell you how it really is: It is hard for most people in the beginning. But once you get past the initial challenges, breastfeeding is one of the most rewarding experiences you'll ever have. In a way, the struggle makes the reward even richer. Because when you emerge from the trenches with someone, you are forever deeply bonded to him or her. In this case that someone is your baby. \*

*Ellie Krieger, RD, is a nutritional consultant and a writer in New York City.*

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