

# Breastfeeding: Use it or Lose it

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By Tanya Evers, MD

*Use it or lose it.* What emotions does that statement evoke? Perhaps it leaves you dreaming of those long lost days when your high school Spanish teacher said if you did not practice, practice, practice, you would never remember all that vocabulary you had struggled to learn. For others, “use it or lose it” is a serious reminder that to keep the mind agile, one must engage in regular social and analytical interactions with people and crosswords alike, lest the years begin to take their toll. The phrase might remind you of something as simple as struggling to remember a rarely used password. It reminds me that getting regular exercise is critical—if you don’t, muscles ache, hills seem steeper, and the time seems to tick away much more slowly.

The adage “use it or lose it” also applies to breastfeeding. Perhaps you are currently pregnant or know someone who is. It is also very possible that you have been breastfeeding or planning to breastfeed but have concerns about managing it when you return to work.

Use it or lose it is the key. **The more you breastfeed your baby, the more milk you will make.** Mothers and lactation consultants can attest to the fact that babies will “cluster feed” when they are brand new to this world. This means that they might breastfeed hourly for a few hours, and then sleep for several hours. They might repeat this pattern, or have no pattern at all for days to weeks. That’s okay. The baby, although not aware of his or her abilities, is doing exactly what needs to be done to get the emotional and nutritional support he or she needs. Let the baby create a pattern and go with it. Your milk will likely not “come in” until you have been discharged from the hospital, which can be disconcerting. But remember, if your baby is making the correct number of wet and soiled diapers daily and your pediatrician is happy with the baby’s growth, your bodies are in sync.

Now, a word to mothers who will be returning to work outside of the home sometime after delivery. I always recommend having a plan before you even go on maternity leave. Speak with your employer about your goals for breastfeeding your baby. The recommendation (from the American Academy of Pediatrics and many other medical organizations) is exclusive breastfeeding for 6 months and then at least up to one year (or longer if so desired by mother



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and baby) while adding in age appropriate foods along the way. You and your baby will probably get into a rhythm weeks after arriving home from the hospital. You will know your baby is full, and you will feel confident your breasts are making what your baby needs. This is the time to challenge your body to make a little more. My proposal is this: After each feeding session, pump your breasts for 5-10 minutes on each side. At first you will only make a little extra milk. Save this! Put it in the fridge, freeze it, sing praises to it, but keep it. And, every time your baby has nursed and fallen asleep with a happily full tummy, pump again. You will be amazed how you will be able to encourage your body to make more milk. This is important for multiple reasons. First, you get to learn how to use and clean your breast pump and its parts. Second, you will become accustomed to the process of collecting and storing milk appropriately. Finally, stimulating your breasts while pumping is not nearly as effective as breastfeeding your baby directly, so tricking your body into making more milk while you are still with your baby 24 hours a day will help establish a little buffer. If you find that you are not able to pump as often as you had planned upon returning to work and your milk supply seems to drop a little, you are still making an adequate amount for your baby because you were making more than enough prior to returning to work.

So, remember, use it or lose it. With a little planning, and the support of those around you, you too can be successful at breastfeeding your baby as long as you both desire. I wish you the very best.