



# How To Avoid Back Pain While Feeding

Many new mothers experience upper back, shoulder and neck pain during the time they are breast feeding. Bottle feeding presents its own very special challenges.

You are looking after your baby but it is important to look after yourself as well.

Unsuitable feeding positions sustained over a prolonged period of time, combined with exhaustion due to broken sleep and stress readily lead to back pain.

**The good news is that it can easily be avoided.**



## *What can I do to breast feed without back pain?*

### **1. Don't lean over**

When you are establishing feeding it can be very tempting to be hunched forward while you are helping your baby to latch on. Bring the baby up to your breast instead of bringing the breast down to the baby! This allows you to sit straight without straining your back.

When you bend forward and look down at your baby the muscles in your upper back, neck and shoulders work to stop you falling forwards. Muscles that work hard and stay in the same position get starved of a fresh blood supply and this leads to pain. Correcting your posture is the answer, but it may not feel like your highest priority whilst feeding your baby.

Many of the mums who come into the clinic for help with pain between the shoulder blades do know they should sit up - but forget because leaning forward can seem easier whilst focusing on correct latching on. Bending for a few moments won't harm you, but it all adds up as the days and weeks go by. It is better to prevent back pain in the first place.

### **2. Sit in a comfortable position that supports your back**

Nursing chairs are designed specifically for breastfeeding, and I am often asked if they are worth it

especially if you do not have a lot of space. In my and my patients' opinion nursing chairs are worth their weight in gold and a great help in your quest to sit comfortably with good posture. The recliner chairs with footrests, in which you can lean back are the most popular.

Extra pillows may still be needed and a nursing pillow is still helpful to raise the baby up to the breast! Nursing chairs cost from £80 upwards. [www.mums2b.co.uk](http://www.mums2b.co.uk) is a useful site; eBay may be worth investigating too.

Avoid couches as they are generally unsuitable, with the seat being too deep and soft. Sit well back in your chair and if your chair seat is deep, support your back with a thick pillow to stop slouching.

### **3. Support your arms while holding your baby**

The weight of even a tiny baby can contribute to back pain if you do not have your arms supported. Place your arm on the armrest - a pillow will often still be needed underneath to bring the baby up to the breast.



You can use normal pillows from a bed, or specially shaped nursing pillows. U and V shapes are the most common nursing pillows, but some are in the shape of a C and some support your back as well. Try out the options, but your needs are likely to change as your baby grows. The good thing about pillows is that they can be arranged in many ways and you can use as many as you need.

#### 4. Try different nursing positions and holds

You are, of course, finding the best position that helps your baby to feed easily, but you want to find positions with the correct posture that suit you too. As you will be spending a great deal of time nursing, it is very important to also find the nursing hold that best suits you.



If you have a toddler you may need to provide extra reassurance at feeding time. Making sure drinks and toys are near before you start feeding will reduce any chances of reaching and straining your back.

## 5. Bottle feeding

Most of the above advice also applies to bottle feeding. Use alternate sides when you bottle feed your baby. A right handed mum will tend to put the baby



on the left arm and hold the bottle with the right whilst a left handed mum will do the opposite. To put the baby on the other arm during every second feed will greatly help reduce muscle strain.

## 6. Take action if your back hurts.

If your back hurts please give it a rest. Lying down on your back for 30 minutes a day with heat on your sore muscles is a good first step. I know it can be tough finding the time to lie down but it will make a world of difference to your back. Chores can wait! Wheat or gel packs (heated in the microwave), a hot water bottle, or

small electric heat pad can be used. For severe and acute pain ice wrapped in a damp tea towel will work better. Do not lie on hard uncomfortable floors but use your bed instead.

Long hot baths warm your body and help you to relax. (Showers are not so effective either for relaxation or body heat, so please enjoy the bath!)



A gentle massage can bring relief and help to loosen your muscles. Ask a kind friend or a partner to help, or visit a therapist. We do massage on its own in my practice too.

If you do not see an improvement or the pain gets progressively worse do see a physiotherapist or a doctor. We get to the source of the problem and assess any underlying conditions.

A physiotherapist can offer diagnosis and hands-on treatment to stop the immediate pain. We give advice on posture, nursing pillows and self treatment.

Our loosening techniques for muscles and spinal joints are gentle and highly effective. Physiotherapy safely

treats your pain, and you will be given individual strengthening exercises to help stop the pain from coming back.

Worrying about pain can itself be damaging, so please get the reassurance and peace of mind you need at this very precious time in your life. You are in a whole new important world, and we understand the last thing you need is back pain.

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Christina Carlsen and her team are chartered physiotherapists and see pregnant and maternity patients at her clinic:

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