

Breastfeeding my pre-term baby

When I discovered that I was expecting my third child I assumed that I would breastfeed him as I had done with my other children. However, when Eoin made a dramatic entry into the world at 26 weeks and 4 days all my plans and hopes were shattered. Eoin was very ill and was ventilated immediately. I was able to see him when he was 5 hours old and this was devastating. He looked so vulnerable in the incubator and I struggled to take in what had happened. Breastfeeding was far from my mind as I stood looking at my baby. However, at some point during that first day a nurse or a midwife talked to me about expressing milk for my son.

I remember that night sitting on my bed with a midwife showing me how to hand express. This wasn't successful so I tried the electric breast pump. This didn't produce any milk either and as I was exhausted the midwife suggested I get some sleep and try again the following day. Eoin's nurse took a photo of him and I looked at this when I expressed the next day. I was triumphant when I managed to produce just a few drops of milk and gave it to Eoin's nurse. By now, Eoin was on TPN and at 1 day old he began to receive half a ml of breastmilk every hour. It took me several days to get into a pattern of expressing milk regularly during the day. It was also a few days before I started to express during the night but I soon got into a pattern of setting my alarm to get up and express. As I was staying in a parents room on the unit I would go and see Eoin before and after I expressed. I am sure this helped with expressing and it was reassuring to see Eoin before I went back to sleep.

It was a worrying and stressful time, not knowing if Eoin would survive or if he did what difficulties he may have, but it helped me knowing that I was doing all I could for Eoin by expressing my milk. I read a lot about expressing milk and the benefits for pre-term babies. I also sought advice and information from staff and family. I read about kangaroo care and did this whenever I could. I was very proud of my initially small amounts of breast milk, which grew in quantity as time went on. Expressing my milk was something that only I could do and as my other children had the benefit of breastmilk I wanted Eoin to have the same.

When Eoin was 10 days old, I left the parents room on the unit and returned home to spend more time with Ciara and Connor, then aged 4 and 2. I visited Eoin twice every day and continued to express every 3 hours in between caring for Ciara and Connor and hospital visits. I

managed this by using a portable double electric pump (medela) which my sister had bought for me. It was the best present I received when Eoin was born and it enabled me to express quickly and easily. I carried the pump with me everywhere and left it by my bed at night for night time expressing.

It was not easy to continue expressing every day when I still felt exhausted and had so much to cope with. I also found it much harder to express milk regularly for Eoin than I had found breastfeeding Ciara and Connor. It was easier to latch a baby on than to attach a pump. However, I was determined to continue and I was spurred on by Eoin's progress and his slow but steady weight gain. After a few weeks, Eoin's milk was fortified and he had vitamins and various things added to ensure he got everything he needed. I was told by the dietician that the composition of breastmilk changes over time and it is usual for babies to need their breastmilk fortified.

At 7 1/2 weeks old Eoin was transferred to a level 2 unit. This move was stressful and difficult for me as I did not want it. My milk production was affected briefly but I persevered with expressing and Eoin was soon ready to begin breastfeeding. Eoin came off his CPAP at eight weeks old and I put him to the breast, he was 34 weeks gestation. I was delighted when he latched on and appeared to feed. I am not sure if he swallowed any milk during that first feed but he had milk around his mouth and I felt that this was an achievement in itself.

I began to put Eoin to the breast during kangaroo care and occasionally during a tube feed. The idea with this was that Eoin would associate sucking with feeling full. Gradually I began to put Eoin to the breast during both visits every day. Together with the nurses we tried to ensure Eoin was due a feed when I visited. This didn't always work out and occasionally Eoin had just had a feed before I arrived. Eoin was still receiving tube feeds, as well as bottle feeds (all expressed milk) and breastfeeds. He seemed to cope well with the combination of breast and bottle feeds and I was happy for him to have a bottle, particularly as it involved my husband more in his care.

After 13 weeks in hospital, Eoin was ready to come home. I did not room-in before he was discharged as it was complicated with 2 other children to care for and I also felt I would get little sleep and knew that I needed all my energy for when Eoin came home. It was daunting but wonderful to take Eoin home and I remained determined to breastfeed. It wasn't easy going from 2 breastfeeds a day to fully breastfeeding and I think Eoin missed his bottles initially. I found the

first couple of weeks at home the most difficult. Eoin wanted to feed a lot but was frustrated with breastfeeding and fed little and often. I did think about giving up but only briefly. I had not expressed every 3 hours for the past 3 months to give up now so I persevered and spent my nights sat up in bed feeding Eoin whenever he wanted to. It was exhausting but satisfying especially when Eoin was weighed and he had gained weight despite the difficulties.

Eoin continued to fully breastfeed and at 17 months old he still has a bedtime feed. I think this will end soon but am pleased that we managed to breastfeed for so long after such a difficult start in life. It was not easy achieving my goal of breastfeeding my pre-term son and at times I needed more support and information than I received. I also felt that, amongst many professionals I encountered, there was no expectation that I would fully breastfeed Eoin.

However, I feel sure that Eoin has benefited from being breastfed in terms of his development and his contented nature. It also helped our relationship and allowed us to establish a closeness that we had been unable to achieve when Eoin was born. Breastfeeding my premature baby was certainly a challenge but I feel it was worthwhile and achievable with the right support and information.