



My experiences with breast feeding

I had my first baby during my hectic training as a family physician and I was only allowed 2 months of maternity leave. I was determined that I would breastfeed exclusively for at least 6 months and for as long as possible after that. Cockily, I thought I was very well prepared with equipment, book knowledge and watching patients breastfeed.

However, things did not go according to plan. Intimidated by hospital procedures, I did not insist that Christopher was put the breast the minute he was born, instead he was whisked away to be suctioned, bathed and wrapped up in a cute little blue blanket for more than 2 hours before I saw him again. By then he was too sleepy and did not latch on properly. As there was no milk yet, he screamed and struggled wildly whenever I put him to the breast. I was constantly trying to feed or pump while entertaining curious visitors with their unsolicited comments. They made me feel like I was a very cruel mother for refusing to give my poor starving baby any supplemental feeding. I finally capitulated in the middle of the second night when the nursing officer insisted to me that my baby was “hypoglycaemic” and “jittery”. I allowed him one glucose feed and then 30 ml of formula. (I have regretted it to this day – whenever my son gets eczema attacks.) I was filled with guilt, depression, confusion and self-doubt. The lactation consultant advised that I could try using the nipple shield to get around the latching on problem.

Things did not improve when I went home, there was still no milk, I bought a “supply line” and rented a hospital style breast pump and consumed vast quantities of fish and papaya soup. I then ended up with a high fever, engorgement, mastitis and a urinary tract infection, for which I was put on antibiotics. I was told that I had to discard my precious milk after taking the antibiotics. After that I had sore and cracked nipples, blood blisters, and every feed was sheer agony and I still couldn’t wean him off the nipple shield. Each feeding session was spent in tears and frustration, very different from those sweet soft-focus posters that I had been dreaming of. My baby was also a slow and sleepy feeder taking up to an hour each time so I felt like I was spending every waking minute breastfeeding or doing related things like washing the pump and the nipple shield.

When it was time to go back to work, I had managed to build up a good stock of expressed breast milk in the freezer. However, I was posted a very busy department with many overnight calls (working 33 hours nonstop). As lowly Medical Officers we did not have our own private office or even a secure place to leave our personal belongings! My bosses were male, single or childless so I did not even try to talk to them about my needs as a breastfeeding mother.

I had to wake up early, feed baby, pump the remainder, put it in a cooler box and send baby and the box to my mother-in-law’s house. Then at work, I had to find an on-call room and quickly express with my electric pump during lunch while trying to write patient summaries and eat lunch with the other hand. Those days that I was too busy to pump or the call room key was taken I would go around feeling like I was carrying two hard painful rocks on my chest and run off to the toilet to hand express some into the toilet for relief! I developed a

painful condition called de Quervain's tenosynovitis of the wrist from the awkward pumping position.

On call nights, my supportive husband would come with his little cooler box and collect the day's supply of milk to bring to baby. When I was really busy, he would do the pumping while I ate dinner! Talk about feeling like a cow! I was able to fully breast feed Christopher till he was 11 months old.

Looking back, I was really proud of myself for having the determination to see it through and glad that I had given my baby the best possible nutrition. Coming from a very allergic family, Christopher only has mild allergies. I'm very sure that it's all thanks to having breastfed him. He was seldom sick despite all the germs I carried back from work and is really bright and in the top class in school.

With Daniel, my second son, I was determined not to suffer again and he was put on the breast the minute the cord was cut. There was absolutely no problem with latching on, the nipple shield was never needed and everything else was a breeze. It was such a different and pleasurable experience. I was even comfortable enough to breastfeed in public with him. I breastfed him until he was almost a year old when he himself decided to wean himself off and he is now a gifted and healthy 10 year old without a single sign of any of the allergies the rest of the family suffers from.

I see lots of patients who have problems with breastfeeding and who are not getting the support they need. Many have abandoned breastfeeding after a few attempts because of wrong advice or lack of encouragement.

After my own experience, I know that with determination and proper guidance, most problems can be overcome no matter how insurmountable it seems at the time. I am glad that in my present practice I can make use of my personal experience combined with medical skills to help my patients and their babies to achieve an enriching and rewarding breastfeeding experience.

*By Dr Lim Hui Ling
MBBS, MMed(Family Medicine), MCFP(S)
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Dr Ling Hui Ling MBBS MMed (Family Med) MCFP(S) is a graduate of the National University of Singapore in 1993. Dr Lim is a senior family physician at IMC and is interested in women's health, asthma and allergies, breastfeeding and minor surgery. She was awarded her Masters in Family Medicine in 1999 and Collegiate Membership of the College of Family Physicians in 2002.

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