

HOW YOUR MILK IS MADE

Your breasts make milk in response to your baby's suckling. The more your baby nurses, the more milk your breasts will make. Knowing how your breast makes milk can help you understand the breastfeeding process. The breast is an organ that is made up of several parts:

ALVEOLI CELLS: grape-like clusters of tissue that make the milk

AREOLA: the dark area around the nipple

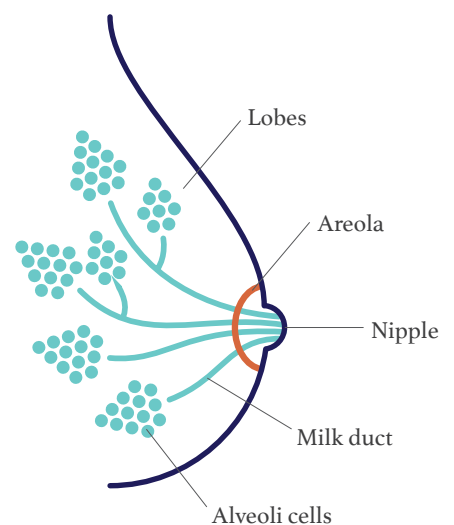
LOBES: the parts of the breast that make milk; each lobe contains alveoli cells and milk ducts

MILK DUCTS: tubes that carry milk through the breast to the nipple/areola area

NIPPLE: the protruding point of the breast

The breasts often become fuller and tender during pregnancy. This is a sign that the alveoli are getting ready to work. Some women do not feel these changes in their breasts. Other women may sense these changes after their baby is born. The alveoli make milk in response to the hormone prolactin. Prolactin rises when the baby suckles. Another hormone, oxytocin, also rises when the baby suckles. This causes small muscles in the breast to contract and move the milk through the milk ducts. This moving of the milk is called the "let-down reflex."

The release of prolactin and oxytocin may make a mother feel a strong sense of needing to be with her baby.



WHAT IS THE LET-DOWN REFLEX?

The let-down reflex (also called just "let-down" or the milk ejection reflex) happens when your baby begins to nurse. The nerves in your breast send signals that release the milk into your milk ducts. This reflex makes it easier for you to breastfeed your baby. Let-down happens a few seconds to several minutes after you start breastfeeding your baby. It also can happen a few times during a feeding. You may feel a tingle in your breast, or you may feel a little uncomfortable. You also may not feel anything.

Let-down can happen at other times, too, such as when you hear your baby cry or when you're just thinking about your baby. If your milk lets down as more of a gush and it bothers your baby, try expressing some milk by hand before you start breastfeeding.

Many factors affect let-down, including anxiety, pain, embarrassment, stress, cold, excessive caffeine use, smoking, alcohol, and some medicines. Mothers who have had breast surgery may have nerve damage that interferes with let-down.