

Breastfeeding triplets - is it possible?

“Are you going to breastfeed?” the nurse asked me. My husband and I were sitting in the clinic in the Rotunda and we had just been told we were expecting triplets. I was holding a strip of three ultrasound pictures in my hand, still shaking as I was trying to take in the news. ‘Well, that was my plan ... with one baby,’ I said. ‘But with three, is it possible?’ The nurse smiled at me and replied, ‘I really don’t know!’

Over the next few weeks I went online and did as much research as I could on the subject of breastfeeding multiples. I also read the book ‘Mothering Multiples’ by Karen Kerkhoff Gromada (La Leche League International). However, I didn’t need anyone to tell me that the logistics of breastfeeding triplets would be challenging to say the least! Also, my consultant had informed me that my babies would arrive early (as higher order multiples do) and depending on how premature they were they might not be able to latch on. But I had made my mind up—although I might not be able to breastfeed directly, I would still be able to give my babies breast milk by expressing.

My husband purchased the Medela Pump in Style electric double breast pump for me when he was in the US, which was great because it was almost twice the price in Ireland. This was nearly three years ago and it has since come down in price here. (The online shop www.inhealth.ie currently has it for sale at €236.55). There are also other alternatives—you could for example buy a pump second hand. Once I was finished with my pump I sold it to another mum for €150. Sometimes you can borrow a good breast pump from your maternity hospital—this is worth checking out before you fork out a lot of money on a new one.

My babies arrived at 31 weeks, weighing in at 1.39 kg, 1.38 kg and 1.59 kg. They were small but doing well overall. It took a couple of days for my milk to come in. I was expressing every three hours, and at the start I only got a few drops out. I delivered those drops to the NICU as

if they were gold dust! At first the boys were tube fed but after a week or so they started to take the bottle. Over the next few days my milk production increased. For the first three weeks I managed to feed the boys exclusively on breast milk and after that we had to top up with formula.

After a couple of weeks I developed mastitis and was put on antibiotics. The doctor's order was to express more often, so that's what I did! The hardest bit was getting up at 3am and then at 6am to express, then getting up again at 8am to go in to the NICU to see the boys. Every morning I brought in a cooler bag with bottles of milk to put in the fridge at the hospital. During the day while at the hospital I would use the pump in the breastfeeding room at NICU. I met other mums in there and in some ways it worked a bit like a support group - our babies had good and bad days, and so did we. It was so nice to be able to talk to other mums with premature babies.

When my boys reached 35 weeks gestation I put them to the breast, but they still didn't latch on that well. It was hard work. They got exhausted from trying to feed on the breast so they probably used more energy than what I could give them, and then they were too tired to take the bottle. Maybe it would have worked with more practice, but I simply didn't have the time. I asked one of the maternity nurses what she thought about me breastfeeding at home. She said "If that's what you want to do, do it. But you won't be doing much else."

After five weeks in the NICU the boys were ready to come home. I continued to express milk around the clock and bottle fed the boys, topping up with formula. My Public Health Nurse suggested I went to the weekly Breastfeeding Support Group in the Health Centre. It met at 10am. I thought she was joking with me. I couldn't get out of my nightdress before lunchtime most days, how could I have organized a trip down to the Health Centre on my own with three babies?

My husband had saved up all his holidays and stayed home for the first month, but then he had to go back to work. Luckily I was granted

Home Help by the HSE - I had a lovely lady coming into the house between 10am and 12noon every Monday to Friday, and that certainly helped me to continue expressing. She cleaned and sterilised bottles, kept the house tidy and sometimes helped me feed one of the babies. She also gave me emotional support and I'll be forever thankful to her!

I continued feeding the boys a mix of breast milk and formula for three months, gradually expressing less milk. I would have liked to continue for another few months but I simply didn't have the time or the energy. One day when I was out doing the shopping, my husband accidentally added too much iron drops to the milk I had left in the fridge and he had to pour it all out. I nearly cried when he told me!

Overall, I am glad I managed to give my babies some breast milk. It was good for their development and spurred them on. This was especially important considering how tiny they were. I would recommend those of you expecting multiples to give it a go. After all, "breast is best", for triplets or more too!

Here are my top tips to those of you who want to breastfeed your multiples:

- Get a hospital-grade breast pump
- Express regularly, at least every three hours, to maximise production and avoid mastitis
- Make sure you eat well or even better - let someone else make sure you eat well, because you might not have too much time to feed yourself!
- Don't despair if your milk is not coming in for a few days after a c-section. It will, so don't give up!
- Don't be too hard on yourself. A little bit of breast milk is better than no breast milk at all!

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