FEEDING THE BABY WITH CLEFT LIP/PALATE

Babies with cleft lip can usually be fed by breast or a conventional bottle. However, some help from breast-feeding counselors may be useful. It is important to create a tight seal around the nipple during feeding.

For breastfeeding babies, the soft breast tissue often will fill the opening in the lip and/or gum line well, sealing off the mouth and allowing the baby to create adequate suction. Sometimes it is helpful for the mother to hold a finger across the cleft during feeding.

Swallowing noises and a bowel movement after feeding are signs that breast-feeding is going well. If the baby is "noisy" with feeding, making clicking or kissing noises, suction may not be adequate.
Mothers who choose to bottle-feed their babies with cleft lip should try using nipples with a wider base, or their infants may need specialty bottles or nipples, such as Haberman feeders. A video demonstrating the use of these feeders can be watched at their website.

When starting a feeding, hold the baby in a slightly upright position. Touch the baby's lower lip with the nipple. Make sure the baby has latched on. Direct the nipple slightly downwards.

Try to keep the nipple in the center of the baby’s mouth. Do not let it slip up into the cleft.

Babies with cleft palate usually need special bottles and techniques to feed adequately. There are several reports describing good results with Haberman feeders.

Sometimes it is possible to breastfeed or use a conventional bottle. However, in most cases, breast feeding becomes extremely difficult and complicated or it is just not even possible. Although in some cases, adequate feeding can be achieved with a conventional bottle, it is much easier to use specialty bottles or nipples.
The problem seems to be that the baby’s nose and mouth are not separated. In babies with cleft palate, there is no “roof” on the mouth, separating the nasal cavities from the oral cavity. Thus, these babies cannot create an effective suction to get the milk out of the breast or bottle.

A baby with cleft palate who is being breast fed, may look like she/he is latching on and sucking appropriately. However, usually these babies use up a lot of energy and they are getting very small amounts of milk.

We encourage mothers who planned to breastfeed to express their milk and feed it to their infants using a special bottle.

While breast milk is considered the most ideal food for all babies, there are added benefits for babies with cleft palate, such as a lower incidence of middle ear infection.
This situation is often difficult for mothers who were looking forward to breastfeeding their babies. It is common for mothers to feel great sadness at the loss of this experience.

It is important to acknowledge this loss, the family and health care providers should provide support in order to help mothers to maintain closeness with their babies.

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