

What Will I Feel When I Use the Breast Pump for my NICU Baby?

Breast pump use in the early days after birth causes beneficial reactions in your body that can make you concerned if you do not know that they are normal.

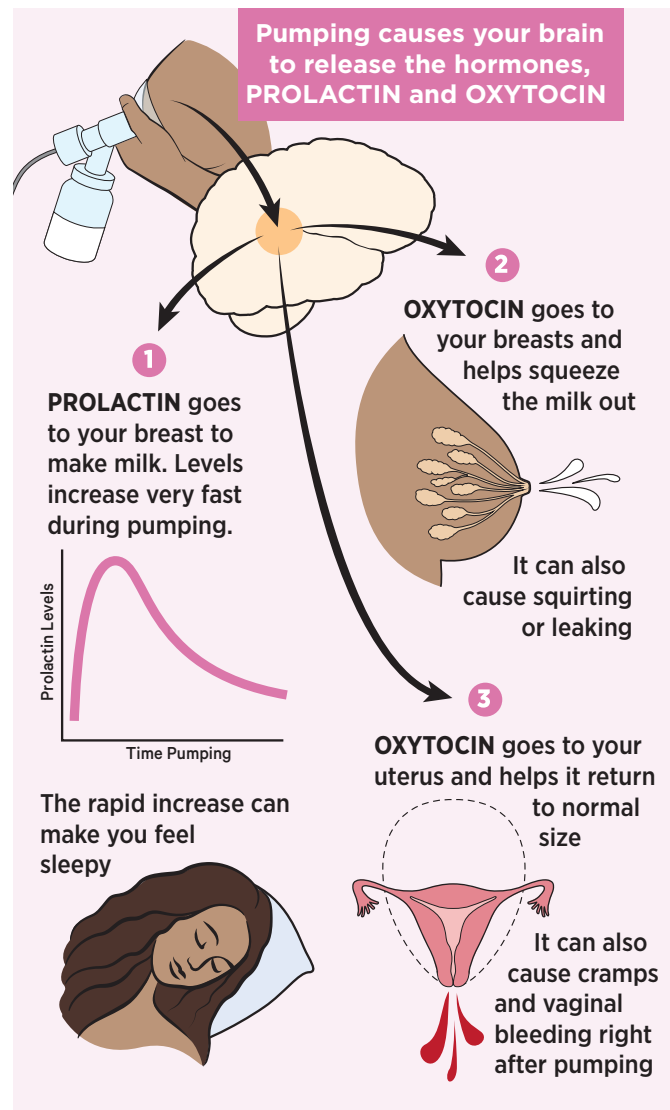
These feelings result from the lactation hormones, **prolactin** and **oxytocin**. Both hormones are made in your brain, sent into your blood stream and attach to nerve endings in your breasts.

Prolactin is the main **milk-making hormone** and is sent from the brain only when you pump or breastfeed.

- Prolactin has a **resting** (lower, steady) level and a **peak** (highest, top) level. When you start pumping, prolactin is at a resting level, but it increases to a peak level very fast — just 30-45 minutes later.
- In new mothers, the peak level can be three times higher than the resting level, so the effects of prolactin can be very strong.
- The rapid increase of prolactin in your blood can feel almost like taking a sleeping pill. Feeling sleepy right after breastfeeding helps a new mother sleep when her baby does (right after eating), and is a beneficial reaction.
- Many NICU mothers say they feel sleepy during or after pumping, and think something is wrong. Some mothers report actually falling asleep using the breast pump. If you feel sleepy during and after pumping, rest assured that prolactin is working normally to boost your milk supply.

Oxytocin attaches to the nerve endings in tiny muscles throughout your body, causing the muscles to squeeze. In your breasts, oxytocin helps the **removal** of milk.

- The ducts in your breasts have these tiny muscles around them and oxytocin makes the muscles squeeze.
- When the muscles squeeze, you will notice squirting or spraying milk during pumping. This is called **milk ejection** (also called the let-down reflex or the coming down of the milk).
- After a week or two, most mothers begin to feel milk ejection, and describe it as a tightening in the breast, or a “pins and needles” sensation in the nipples.
- Some mothers confuse these sensations with sore nipples. However, if the discomfort is felt in both nipples and goes away in a minute or two, it is probably milk ejection.



- Oxytocin can also be sent from the brain when you hold or think about your baby, so milk can drip or leak from your breasts even if you are not pumping.
- The uterus also has nerve endings that attach to oxytocin, which causes cramping (afterbirth pains) in the first days after birth.
- Pumping causes oxytocin to increase, so mothers usually feel the strongest uterine cramps during and right after pumping.
- Uterine cramps push out the afterbirth products, so after pumping you may notice a sudden rush of vaginal bleeding, which is more noticeable when you stand up.
- The cramping and vaginal discharge are normal reactions that help the uterus go back to its before-pregnancy size more quickly. This reduces the chances of postpartum complications, especially bleeding and infection.

Created by: Paula Meier, PhD, RN;
Aloka Patel, MD and Judy Janes, RN, IBCLC

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