

Breastfeeding Strike by LaLecheLeague

<https://www.llli.org/breastfeeding-info/nursing-strikes/>

MY BABY IS SUDDENLY REFUSING TO NURSE. DOES THAT MEAN IT'S TIME TO WEAN?

A baby who is truly ready to wean will almost always do so gradually, over a period of weeks or months. If your baby or toddler has been breastfeeding well and suddenly refuses to nurse, it is probably what is called a “nursing strike,” rather than a signal that it's time to wean. Nursing strikes can be frightening and upsetting to both you and your baby, but they are almost always temporary. Most nursing strikes are over, with the baby back to breastfeeding, within two to four days.

First thing to remember is to feed the baby. The other important thing is to protect your supply.

Nursing strikes happen for many reasons. They are almost always a temporary reaction to an external factor, although sometimes their cause is never determined. Here are some of the most common triggers of nursing strikes:

- You changed your deodorant, soap, perfume, lotion, etc. and you smell “different” to your baby.
- You have been under stress (such as having extra company, returning to work, traveling, moving, dealing with a family crisis).
- Your baby or toddler has an illness or injury that makes nursing uncomfortable (an ear infection, a stuffy nose, thrush, a cut in the mouth).
- Your baby has sore gums from teething.
- You recently changed your nursing patterns (started a new job, left the baby with a sitter more than usual, put off nursing because of being busy, etc.).
- You reacted strongly when your baby bit you, and the baby was frightened.
- You are newly pregnant and your milk supply may be reduced.
- You are ovulating and your milk supply may be temporarily reduced.
- You have been pumping less time or with less frequency when away from baby.
- You have been sick and/or taking a medication (including some methods of birth control), which can have a negative impact on your supply.

One additional consideration is a strong or overactive letdown (OALD), where your milk comes in so fast and sprays hard that baby can't control it well and closes his mouth, refusing the breast.

Only you know for certain which, if any, of the above factors apply in your current situation. No matter what the cause, a nursing strike is upsetting for everyone. The baby

may be difficult to calm and unhappy. You might feel frustrated and upset. Remember your baby isn't rejecting you. Breastfeeding will almost always get back to normal with a little time.

Getting over the nursing strike and getting your baby back to the breast takes patience and persistence. Get medical attention if an illness or injury seems to have caused the strike. See if you can get some extra help with your household chores and any older children so that you can spend lots of time with the baby.

Try to relax and concentrate on making breastfeeding a pleasant experience. Stop and comfort your baby if he or she gets upset when you try to nurse. Extra cuddling, stroking, and skin-to-skin contact with the baby can help you re-establish closeness.

Additionally, these time-tested suggestions have helped many nursing parents overcome a nursing strike. They are best to try before a baby's normal feeding times, to assure that baby is not hungry and likely more resistant at the breast.

- Try not to stress about it. (So easy to say, not to do.) The baby will pick up on stress. Play calming music, lower lights in the house, go skin to skin as much as possible.
- Nurse the baby as he is asleep, just awakening, or is very drowsy. As we drift to sleep or awaken, we are in a more primitive state of mind and since breastfeeding is a survival behavior for babies, sometimes they revert to feeding well at this time.
- Vary nursing positions.
- Nurse when in motion. In this case, a sling or cloth carrier can be useful.
- Give the baby extra attention and skin to skin contact.
- Hold the baby in a sling or baby carrier between attempts to nurse to increase bonding.
- Lay in bed to play with baby while you are topless, with no pressure to nurse. Just the open invitation if baby searches for the breast.
- Nurse in a quiet, darkened room free of distractions.
- Stimulate your let-down and get your milk flowing before offering the breast so the baby gets an immediate reward.
- Take a warm bath together with lots of skin to skin snuggling and no pressure to nurse.
- Sleep together, giving baby easy access to the breast while sleeping.
- Spend time around other nursing babies and toddlers. Sometimes peer pressure can be a good thing! A LLL meeting is a natural place to do this. Playgroups or busy store nursing rooms can also be helpful.

While you are trying to persuade your baby back to the breast, you'll want to make sure baby gets enough milk to sustain him and you keep your milk supply flowing.

You may consider feeding by cup, spoon, eyedropper, or syringe while you work on getting him back to the breast. You might feed baby by bottle, making sure to practice paced **bottle feeding**. Tilting a bottle or using fast-flow nipples can sometimes confuse baby and bring on a nursing strike. You may find that his need to suck will encourage him to nurse instead of "just eating" by the other methods. Try to keep in mind, this could all be over in a day or two.

While baby is refusing breast, you need to extract your milk as often as baby has been nursing. Some moms find hand expression to be effective, while others rely on **pumping**. Not only does this practice protect your supply, it also saves you from potential clogged ducts or mastitis.

Take one hour at a time. Be gentle with yourself. Your local LLL Leader can offer support and more suggestions if these don't seem to be working.

Finally, if this strike goes on and days turn into weeks, this may signal the end of your nursing journey. Please recognize what a gift you have given your child! It can be an emotional time, especially when your "plan" was to nurse longer. Not to mention hormonal changes as your milk supply diminishes. Take care of yourself and manage the weaning carefully to avoid clogged ducts or mastitis. We recognize each nursing's breastfeeding journey is entirely individual and unique. This is yet another step in your motherhood journey. Congratulate yourself on your breastfeeding effort!