Premature babies (babies born three or more weeks before their due date) need extra love and care because they did not grow or develop as much as they could have before birth. These babies often have health conditions that need special care. Premature babies are more likely to have health problems early in life and may face other challenges as well. As a parent, you are an important part of your baby’s care. Your breastmilk is one of the most important things you can give your baby and nothing compares to it. Breastmilk offers many health benefits to babies that not only help them grow and develop, but can last a lifetime.

Premature Babies Need Breastmilk
All babies benefit from breastmilk. For premature babies, the benefits are even more important. They not only get the benefits that a full-term baby receives from breastmilk, but they also get benefits that preemies need.

- Breastmilk is easier to digest than formula and this helps their digestion and growth.
- The carbohydrates found in breastmilk help infants absorb minerals more easily. They also can help slow the growth of harmful bacteria in a preemie’s gut.
- Breastmilk has immune factors that are not found in formula. Breastmilk can help reduce infections and also protect against illness.
- Breastmilk can also help with early brain development. Studies show that babies who got breastmilk scored higher on tests that measured brain development than babies who did not get breastmilk.

Breastfeeding Your Premature Baby
Babies born early may not always feed at the breast right away. At first, they may have a harder time latching on or staying latched on to the breast. Learning to breastfeed may take longer than you expect. Most premature babies become much better at breastfeeding around the time of their original due date. If you have questions or need more support, call the 24-Hour Breastfeeding Hotline at 1-800-833-4642.

Here are some tips for breastfeeding success with a premature baby:

- **Ask for a lactation consultant**
  A lactation consultant can help you get started breastfeeding and establish your milk supply. They are a great source of breastfeeding information and they can help you develop your breastfeeding skills or pump management skills.

- **Use skin to skin care, ‘kangaroo care’**
  This not only makes your baby feel calm and relaxed, it can help your baby gain weight and increase your milk production. Be sure to ask your health care team about skin to skin care (also called kangaroo care).

- **Establish your milk supply**
  You can establish your milk supply by breastfeeding and expressing (removing milk with your hand) or pumping. Starting as soon as possible, express or pump often and use the right type of pump to establish your milk supply.

- **Take care of your own health**
  Since you are the source of the breastmilk, it is important that you take care of yourself. Remember to feed yourself, stay hydrated, and rest whenever possible. Your baby needs you to be well.
If Your Baby Cannot Breastfeed
Some babies are not able to breastfeed, so expressing or pumping your breastmilk is an option for giving breastmilk to your premature baby. Your baby will still get the same benefits and nutrients from your expressed or pumped breastmilk. The breastmilk can be given to your baby with a spoon, cup, bottle, or feeding tube. Some moms find it easier to hand express (remove milk using your hand) when collecting colostrum (early milk) and use a breastpump when their volume of milk increases. You may be able to get a breastpump through your insurance. Call your insurance customer service line about this benefit. If you are enrolled or are eligible for WIC services, you may be able to get a WIC breastpump. Call your WIC office for assistance.

How Often Should I Pump or Express Milk?
Pumping or expressing milk 8 to 12 times in 24 hours can help ensure that you have plenty of milk for your baby. Your milk supply relates to how often you pump or express milk. The more you pump or express, the more milk your body will make. Pumping both breasts at the same time for 10-15 minutes each session is best. Your breasts should be soft after each pump session. Mothers of multiple babies may find that they need to pump longer and more often.

How Much Milk Should I Get?
At first, you may only get a few drops of colostrum. Don’t worry—that’s totally normal. As you continue to pump, your milk volume will increase. Every mom will express a different amount of milk. This will vary based on several things, such as how early the baby was born, how often you pump, your nutrition and hydration, and your health. It does not matter how much milk you express, every drop counts! Your baby only needs tiny amounts of your milk in the first few days, and your colostrum has lots of antibodies and nutrients. If you or your health care team are concerned about your milk production, ask a lactation consultant.

Support for You and Your Family
Having a premature baby can feel stressful and lonely, but you and your family don’t have to do it alone. It can be helpful to talk to other parents who have had a premature baby and who understand what you’re going through. For more referrals, ask your hospital’s social workers, lactation consultant, WIC office, or call the 24-Hour Breastfeeding Hotline at 1-800-833-4642.