

Care Plan for Relieving Breast Engorgement for the Breastfeeding Mother

Between days 3-5, mother's milk begins to increase as her milk "comes in." It is normal for your breasts to feel fuller, heavier, and tender. Your breasts become engorged with milk and with other fluids that are used to make the milk. This normal fullness usually goes away when a baby is breastfeeding or if you are pumping often and well.

Some women become overly engorged. They develop hard, swollen, painful breasts when the milk first "comes in." The nipple and areola may become hard and flat, making it difficult for baby to latch on deeply to remove enough milk. Mother's nipples become sore from baby latching on to the nipple alone. By not treating engorgement, your milk production can decrease.

Care Plan Goals

- Decrease breast swelling so that milk will flow from your breasts

Suggestions for Relieving Engorgement—Decrease Swelling

- Breastfeed or pump breasts every 2-2 ½ hours during the day and 3 hours at night
- Decrease swelling in your breasts by applying cold packs 20 minutes before breastfeeding or pumping (See more info on cold pack at the end of this care plan)
- **Do not use heat on swollen breasts.** Heat can make swelling worse.
- Use **light touch massage** for 10 minutes before pumping. Refer to *The Basics of Breast Massage and Hand Expression* and *Breast Gymnastics* videos at:
 - <https://www.mayabolman.com/videos/v/basicsofbreastmassage>
 - <https://www.mayabolman.com/videos/v/breastgymnastics>
 - <https://www.mayabolman.com/videos/v/handexpression>

Helping Baby Latch On When You are Engorged

Sometimes a mother's nipples and areolas become too full for baby to latch on. You can soften those areas by using hand expression, reverse pressure softening, or pumping some milk out for 1-2 minutes before breastfeeding. Follow the suggestions for hand expression shown in the video at the website shown above.

Once baby is latched on, massage your breasts while breastfeeding or pumping by stroking toward your baby's mouth or the pump flange to help keep milk flowing.

Relieving Uncomfortable Fullness After Breastfeeding

If your breasts are still uncomfortably full after breastfeeding, you can express some milk for relief. It's important to express just enough to be comfortable. Do not overdo the pumping since it may encourage overproduction. You may only need to do this temporarily since the engorgement should decrease in 24-48 hours.

Videos are listed with permission of Maya Bolman, RN, BSN, IBCLC

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Suggestions for Making and Using Cold Packs:

Cold packs are used to relieve breast swelling so your milk will flow more easily. They are also used for your comfort. You may only need to use them for 24-48 hours as needed. To make cold packs:

- Place crushed ice or small ice cubes in several Ziplock bags. (You can also use 16 oz bags frozen peas or corn)
- Use enough cold packs to wrap around your breasts
- Put Ziplock bags inside a pillowcase and place around your breasts
- Use cold packs 20 minutes before massaging and breastfeeding or pumping and for 20 minutes afterwards
- You can also use the cold packs more frequently between feedings or pumping sessions as needed for comfort

Cold packs containing frozen peas or corn can be put back in the freezer to refreeze and use later on your breasts. Do not eat the peas or corn after they have been thawed and refrozen.

Other Suggestions for Relieving Engorgement:

- Ask your doctor about using a non-steroidal, anti-inflammatory medication, such as ibuprofen, to reduce inflammation
- Wear a supportive, well-fitting bra but avoid a tight underwire bra or clothing that may put pressure on breasts
- Drink plenty of water and healthy fluids. Avoid high sodium (salt) in foods.

If Baby Continues to Have Trouble Breastfeeding After Following This Care Plan:

- You may need to pump your breasts and provide your milk with a bottle or other feeding method until baby can latch on

How Long Will Engorgement Last?

- Continue to follow this care plan for 24-48 hours until engorgement is gone

If engorgement has not improved in 24 hours after following this care plan:

- Call the TriHealth Breastfeeding Helpline 513-862-7867 option 3 to leave a message for a lactation consultant. Your call will be returned within 24 hours.
- If your engorgement worsens, and you develop a fever, call your doctor, *and* continue to follow this *Care Plan*.

For questions or concerns regarding breastfeeding or pumping, call the TriHealth Breastfeeding Helpline (513-862-7867 option 3).

Selected References:

Berens, P., Brodrigg, W., & Academy of Breastfeeding Medicine. (2016). ABM clinical protocol# 20: engorgement, revised 2016. *Breastfeeding Medicine*, 11(4), 159-163.

Witt, A. M., Bolman, M., Kredit, S., & Vanic, A. (2016). Therapeutic breast massage in lactation for the management of engorgement, plugged ducts, and mastitis. *Journal of Human Lactation*, 32(1), 123-131.