

Tandem Nursing-- How Doulas Can Help

By Hilary Dervin Flower, MA

Birth and breastfeeding. They go hand in hand. What about when they overlap? What kind of support might a mother need from her doula if she is pregnant *and* breastfeeding? Answer? A lot! I researched many aspects of breastfeeding during pregnancy for my new book, *Adventures in Tandem Nursing: Breastfeeding during Pregnancy and Beyond*, published by La Leche League International in July 2003. As a doula you can play a very important role for breastfeeding and pregnant mothers in your care.

The first thing you can do is tell the mother that she is not alone, far from it! In a study of 179 mothers who had breastfed for at least six months, 61% had also breastfed during a subsequent pregnancy. Of these, 38% went on to nurse the newborn and toddler together, an arrangement known as *tandem nursing*.¹ Particularly if she is facing criticism or difficulties, encourage her to reach out to other mothers who have overlapped breastfeeding and pregnancy, either through her local La Leche League or online (for instance, the extended nursing board at www.mothing.com).

You can also tell her that continuing to nurse her older baby or toddler can make a big difference to that child's health. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends a minimum of one year of breastfeeding and the World Health Organization calls for

two years or more. When considering the possibility of weaning during pregnancy, the American Academy of Family Physicians points out that weaning before the age of two raises a child's risk of illness.² And many tandem nursing mothers feel that continuing to nurse the older child eases the adjustment to a baby sibling.

What can a mother expect from an overlap? She may find that her milk dwindles by mid-pregnancy or that breastfeeding sessions agitate her or cause her pain. She may consider decreasing nursing time or weaning. Her child may unexpectedly self-wean, perhaps in response to the change in flavor or quantity of milk. As she tries to find the balance between her own needs and those of her child, you can be an active listener and convey confidence in her ability to make the best choice for her unique family. Particularly if she is surrounded by people who have strong opinions about what she should do, a respectful and compassionate doula can make all the difference.

If her prenatal caregiver is inexperienced with breastfeeding, she may need help in evaluating the safety of continued breastfeeding. Many obstetricians have never considered the possibility of a mother breastfeeding during pregnancy, and some of them are quick to recommend weaning when the topic does arise. Midwives

tend to be more experienced with breastfeeding and with trusting the mother's body to do what it needs to do. It is important for mothers to know that although we still lack a directed medical study, the related research offers reason to believe that breastfeeding is compatible with a healthy pregnancy.³

What about breastfeeding contractions? Like orgasm, nipple stimulation causes a release of oxytocin into the bloodstream, which in turn causes the uterus to contract. In one survey 7% of mothers breastfeeding during pregnancy experienced strong contractions while nursing, but the contractions stopped soon after ending the session, and they went on to have healthy term babies.⁴ When I delved into the medical literature I was impressed with the many ways in which the healthy pregnant uterus is protected from going into labor prematurely. There are valid reasons to doubt that breastfeeding can trigger preterm labor in a healthy pregnancy.³ Of course, all mothers should be aware of the signs of preterm labor and should consult with their prenatal caregiver if they have any concerns.

Another health-related concern is eating for three—can it be done? Unless the mother is clinically malnourished, she should be able to eat enough for her own reserves, her growing fetus, and her milk production. Her biggest challenge



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may be morning sickness. She will need to gain weight just as she would if she weren't breastfeeding. Any mother who is continuing to lose weight, particularly after the first trimester, will need to problem-solve her individual situation with her caregiver. She may benefit from a new approach to morning sickness, snacking, waiting a bit to evaluate her situation, sometimes even reducing nursing. Some moms find that weaning causes morning sickness to escalate, so changes in breastfeeding should not be made lightly.

Many mothers wonder how breastfeeding might fit into their labor and birth story. You can tell the mother in your care that once labor is underway, breastfeeding her child may help augment labor. Some mothers find it helpful to have the older child present during early labor. But it can be hard to care for a child while doing the hard work of birthing. As her doula you can help the mother incorporate the older child's needs into her birth plan, perhaps compiling a phone list of possible caregivers you can call for her. You can also list effective nursing substitutes, such as swinging to sleep at naptime, a favorite drink or snack, and favorite ways to share closeness. You may need to help care for the child at times, too!

Once the new baby is born, you can facilitate the first nursing and the first tandem nursing. Usually the mother needs to have a few minutes

to recover from birthing and to hold her new baby before she welcomes the older child to the breast. She may also want to breastfeed the new baby for a while first. Cuddling the older child and gently explain what is happening can help. The mother may feel unsure about how to nurse the two together. Help her by demonstrating the use of pillows and different positions for her and the children's comfort. You can help create a private moment for her, or answer the questions of any lingering extended family or birthing staff who have never seen tandem nursing before!

In the early weeks tandem nursing can be tricky. Sometimes the older child craves to nurse all the time, and the mother can feel like she has two newborns! If the older child goes through a period of emotional upheaval, the mother may be subjected to demands, whining and misbehavior around breastfeeding. By listening to her and problem-solving with her you can help the mother figure out how to establish loving boundaries around nursing.

Tandem nursing mothers sometimes have difficulty making simultaneous nursing work. You can support her in finding a workable position, or, if separate nursing seems the way to go, you can help her find a chance to leave the couch to use the bathroom or get a snack! Help her stock her nursing station with snacks, drinks and books for herself and her toddler. If she has a partner, she may need a good listener as she explores the challenges of adding a new child to the family. Sometimes partners are needed during the tandem nursing days to bring mom a snack, or to hold one of the children while she nurses the other.

Breastfeeding moms are giving heart, soul, and breast to their beloved children. Tandem nursing mothers deserve a double dose of support! Having a knowledgeable and supportive doula can make all the difference. You will find more about the safety, nutrition, positions, and the many surprises of breastfeeding during pregnancy and tandem nursing in books, from Web sites, breastfeeding professionals and support groups.

Reference

- 1) From an unpublished study by Kathleen Kendall-Tackett, Ph.D., IBCLC, Sugarman, M., M.D., 2003; discussed in Flower, Hilary. *Adventures in Tandem Nursing: Breastfeeding During Pregnancy and Beyond*. La Leche League International, Schaumburg, Illinois, 2003. p. 16.
- 2) AAFP Policy Statement on Breastfeeding can found at {<http://www.aafp.org/x6633.xml>}; the selected quote is from the sub-heading "Nursing Beyond Infancy."
- 3) Flower, Hilary. *Adventures in Tandem Nursing: Breastfeeding During Pregnancy and Beyond*. La Leche League International, Schaumburg, Illinois, 2003. p. 209-46.
- 4) Moscone [sic—the researcher's name is Moscona], SR., Moore, M.J. Breastfeeding during pregnancy. *J Hum Lact* 1993; 9(2):83-88.

Hilary Flower lives in Florida with her partner Ben, daughter Nora Jade (5) and son Miles (2). While tandem nursing, Hilary wrote her first book: Adventures in Tandem Nursing: Breastfeeding During Pregnancy and Beyond (La Leche League International, July 2003). She is now corresponding with parents for her new book on gentle discipline and invites you to participate. Visit her at www.nursingtwo.com.