More Milk Releases = More Milk Expressed

Many people think that a pump needs to generate strong suction to be effective. However, it is recommended you use the highest level that is comfortable...and no higher.[1] (If you are gritting your teeth, it is definitely up too high!) Suction strong enough to cause pain actually expresses less milk. So if stronger suction is not the key to pumping more milk, then what is?

Understanding Milk Release

Expressing milk with a pump is not like sucking liquid through a straw. With a straw, the stronger you suck, the more liquid you get. With the breast, the key to expressing milk is triggering the let-down, or milk release. Without a milk release, most of the milk stays in the breast.[2] What happens during a milk release?

- Hormones cause muscles within the breast to squeeze and the ducts to widen, pushing the milk toward the nipple.
- Some mothers feel a tingling sensation; others feel nothing.
- A milk release can be triggered by a certain touch at the breast, hearing a baby cry, or even by thinking about your baby. Familiar cues like the soft feel and warmth of your baby can cause the release. Feelings of tension, anger, or frustration can block it.

A Pump Is Different

During normal breastfeeding, most mothers have several milk releases per feeding without even knowing it. To get the best results with a pump, you should also have several milk releases. But you may need some help at first until the feel of the pump becomes familiar and your body responds automatically.

One way to trigger more milk releases, either at first or later in your pumping, is to use your senses. One or two of your senses will probably work better than the others, so experiment.

- **Mind/Feelings:** Close your eyes, relax, and imagine your baby breastfeeding. Think about how much you love your baby.
- **Sight:** Look at your baby or your baby's photo.
- **Hearing:** Listen to a recording of your baby cooing or crying. If you're away, call the caregiver and check on your baby. Or call someone you love to relax and distract you.
- **Smell:** Smell an item of your baby's clothing.
- **Touch:** Apply warm compresses or gently massage your breasts.
- **Taste:** Sip a favorite, warm non-alcoholic drink to relax.

If your pump has separate "Suction/Vacuum" and "Cycles" controls, adjusting them during pumping may also help trigger more milk releases more quickly:

- Begin by adjusting your "Suction/Vacuum" to the highest comfortable setting.
- Start with "Cycles" on the fastest setting.
- When milk begins to flow, turn "Cycles" down to near the slowest setting.
- When the milk flow slows to a trickle, return to fast "Cycles."
- Repeat, using fast cycles to trigger milk releases and slow cycles to drain them.

Many mothers find this reduces time spent waiting for the next milk release and expresses more milk more quickly. Use whatever settings work best.

Changing Pumps and Your Body's Response

Keep these ideas in mind if you change pumps. Some mothers begin pumping in the hospital and switch to another pump at home. It's not uncommon after changing pumps to get less milk at first, even when the new pump is of top quality. Why? The new feel of a pump may not trigger as many milk releases as quickly.

> **"...milk [release] is, at least in part, a conditioned response."**
>
> *– Lactation researcher Jacqueline Kent, PhD[3]*

This sometimes happens in reverse when a mother transitions from pumping to breastfeeding. For example, when the tiny preterm baby is finally strong enough to breastfeed, some mothers find that their milk does not release as well to the new feel of the baby. These mothers benefit from these same strategies.

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1 Ramsay, D., et al. "Milk Flow Rates Can Be Used to Identify and Investigate Milk Ejection in Women Expressing Breast Milk Using an Electric Breast Pump." ***Breastfeeding Medicine*** 2006; 1(1):14.

2 Ramsay, D., et al. "Ultrasound Imaging of Milk Ejection in the Breast of Lactating Women." ***Pediatrics*** 2004; 113:361-67.

3 Kent, J., et al. **"Response of Breasts to Different Stimulation Patterns of an Electric Breast Pump,"** *Journal Of Human Lactation* 2003: 19(2) 179-186.

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