

Help! My baby has a ***TIGHT JAW!***

How a tight jaw can get in the way
of a good latch and how to fix it

BY KIRSTEN HANNAN

Breastfeeding may be natural, but it is not always easy! When breastfeeding isn't going well, it can be very distressing for everyone concerned. Understanding why some babies struggle to breastfeed can help in identifying possible solutions and getting both mother and baby on their way to a successful breastfeeding relationship.

There are many reasons why breastfeeding difficulties might occur in the early days and weeks. Jaw issues – specifically, muscle and joint problems affecting the temporomandibular joint (TMJ) – are one of the problems that can make breastfeeding difficult for babies, as well as painful and frustrating for mothers.

People are often surprised that newborn babies can have muscle and joint problems, but it does happen!





They may result from how the baby is positioned in the uterus during pregnancy, or strain that occurs during the birth process, especially if labour was prolonged or forceps or vacuum have been used to assist in the birth. In some cases, a tight jaw may also be due to a physical issue like tongue tie, where a tight membrane connects the tongue to the floor of the mouth, restricting movement.

Look at the steps to getting a good latch, and it becomes clear why a tight jaw impacts breastfeeding. Once the baby's body is in good tummy-to-tummy or chest-to-chest contact with the mother



Understanding why a tight jaw impacts breastfeeding becomes clear by looking at the steps to getting a good latch

and their back is well supported, the baby will start to root for the nipple and open their mouth wide; this is known as a wide gape. They will then tilt their head back and contact the breast with their chin and bottom lip, allowing the tongue to reach forward to grasp the breast, cupping the nipple and forming a seal with flanged lips. This is followed by rhythmic sucking with smooth jaw excursion and pauses with each swallow. If the baby cannot open their mouth wide or cannot reach their chin and tongue forward, a shallow

SHOW ME THE SIGNS

Common signs during breastfeeding that may indicate a jaw issue:

- Difficulty achieving a comfortable and effective latch, often due to not opening the mouth wide enough. This may be more pronounced on one breast.
- Ineffective suckling, often resulting in sore nipples.
- Milk dribbling out of the mouth when at the breast due to poor seal.
- Clamping, biting, or chewing the nipple or chomping at the breast rather than smooth, rhythmic suckling.
- Sucking in the lips, dimpling of the cheeks, slurping, clicking, losing the seal at the breast.

Other physical signs to look out for in babies with jaw issues are:

- Baby has a preference to turn their head to one side only or hold their head to one side.
- Baby's face is not symmetrical.
- Crooked smile.
- Baby's chin is receding.
- Asymmetrical jaw movement when crying or yawning.



latch and ineffective suckling is likely to result, and this is often painful for the mother.

Seeking out early breastfeeding support is often key to establishing a mutually beneficial breastfeeding relationship with your baby. If something doesn't feel right – breastfeeding shouldn't hurt! – get the help of an experienced lactation consultant (IBCLCs are the most highly qualified lactation consultants) as soon as possible. Reach out to your local breastfeeding counsellor support service, peer-to-peer breastfeeding support group, or your local La Leche League group for advice, support, and encouragement.

If you think that a tight jaw or other muscle or joint issue may be a factor in



your breastfeeding difficulty, consult a practitioner such as an osteopath specialising in babies, who can offer hands-on care.

Osteopaths are manual therapists who treat the muscles and joints of the body (and all of their connections) to reduce pain and improve movement and function. An osteopath will assess each baby individually, checking muscles and joints for any tension or tenderness that may impact feeding function. Osteopaths use gentle techniques such as massage and subtle joint movements to relieve tension and improve muscle and joint function. Osteopaths can also advise you on simple exercises that may help to improve feeding, such as massage techniques to the face and mouth and sucking exercises to help the jaw and tongue function properly. 💧

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