

Chocolate Cake and Chinese Banquets: Understanding your baby's feeding patterns

by Sarah Hung IBCLC

In the early weeks of breastfeeding there is little for a mother to do except for feed, feed, feed. Often the feeding pattern of our breastfeeding newborns doesn't live up to our expectations. What about those 3 hourly feeds some baby books led us to believe are the norm? And there may be pressure from other family members to put baby on a more regular schedule.

In fact, it's normal for breastfeeding babies to feed very frequently. If a mother is concerned about this behaviour, perhaps it helps to think of baby's feeding pattern as either 'Chocolate Cake Syndrome' or 'Chinese Banquet Syndrome'.

Chocolate Cake Syndrome

Imagine that my husband and I are eating dinner. I tell him that we have a chocolate cake for dessert. However, when he finishes his main course he tell me that he is full and doesn't want any cake. At this point I suggest watching TV! When the first adverts come on he says, "You know maybe I'll have a piece of that cake after all."

This behaviour is very common in babies (as well as husbands). The 'chocolate cake' feed is usually just 5 to 10 minutes but sometimes the baby doesn't just want one slice of cake but the whole thing and you end up feeding for another hour.

This doesn't mean that you don't have enough milk. Just like I had enough food for my husband (after all I had a whole cake when he said he was full) you also have enough milk. It was the baby who changed his mind.

This analogy is actually very good. Just as chocolate cake is a high fat snack after your meal, any milk that the baby takes after a feed will be higher in fat than the original feed – just like a piece of chocolate cake!



Chinese Banquet Syndrome

Rather than having big feeds with big gaps some babies like to have lots of small feeds. Mothers often worry about this because they seem to be spending all the time feeding and feel they aren't able to do anything during the short breaks between feeds.

I like to think of this as a Chinese banquet. At banquets each dish you are given is quite small but you are given lots and lots of them and at the end of the evening you are fuller than if you'd had a meal at home.

Some babies like to eat like this, often wanting to be at, or near, the breast for two to three hours or more. It is so common it has a name, cluster feeding. But it is a behaviour that I know many new mothers worry about. Again, it doesn't mean you don't have enough milk – rather that your baby wants to feed this way. When the baby eventually stops and goes to sleep he usually sleeps for quite along time, maybe even four or five hours.