Your baby is a mammal, no more, no less. And like every other newborn mammal, he follows a “feeding sequence” to find his lunch. You can shorten that sequence for most babies, once you know what it is they’re looking for.

If your baby fusses, your instinct has you bring him upright against your shoulder. You pat him and talk gently to him – all instinct! And what you’ve done is put him in a position from which he can reach his food source on his own.

Every mammal newborn wants to be able to “hug the ground,” or, in the case of primates, to hug Mama. With their front held securely against Mama, babies can begin to think about food.

Humans are vertical. Like the other Great Apes, we spend our lives with a vertical posture. Look at pictures of babies in other cultures. The babies are almost always vertical – often even when they’re feeding. And the smaller babies usually have their fronts against their mothers.

A squatting ape or human has room to hold her baby vertically while he nurses. Once we started sitting on furniture, we had laps, and space got tighter. But if you lean back comfortably against some pillows, you lengthen your torso and gravity holds your baby’s front against you. Even if you sit up, slump a little so gravity can help, and maybe rest his hip on your thigh so that he’s somewhat vertical while he feeds.

Whether he starts from a vertical position on your shoulder and skootches his way down, or whether you lay him comfortably on your partly reclining torso, he expects to feel an expanse of your skin touching his face. Once he does, if he’s hungry he’ll begin to bob or root or simply reach, tipping his head back and opening his mouth wide. “I’ve found Breast,” he’s saying. “Now, where’s Nipple?” He’ll want to plant his chin on your breast first, to help steady himself. If you sense that he could use a little guidance or a little breast-repositioning, do what feels right to you. Mothers and babies have always worked with each other for the easiest nursing, with the baby leading the way and the mother helping him (but not telling him what to do and when).

Newborns can go forward and sideways, but not backward. Your baby expects to reach forward with his head tipped slightly back. When he feels “solid ground” (your body) against his front, he can do the head tip that allows him to open his mouth extra wide. He can’t do this if your nipple is near his lower lip. (Try opening your mouth with your chin tucked. Your tongue humps up in back, and your jaw is cramped against your chest. No one ever tried to chug a drink in that position.) So if he “overshoots,” just move him back to where he can move forward or sideways again.

When your baby’s mouth opens wide and he feels a lot of breast on his tongue and a bit of nipple somewhere just ahead of his mouth, he’ll try to finish the mouthful, draw in all that hunk of breast, and begin sucking. Lean back comfortably, and let gravity help keep the two of you together.

©2012 Diane Wiessinger, MS, IBCLC  www.normalfed.com

A PRACTICAL TIP
Some moms find this position awkward, perhaps because it’s not one we grow up seeing anyone else doing. I encourage you to try it and try it again and again. No pillows are needed under the baby and babies tend to get a better and deeper latch with this position which means less discomfort for mom! You may want a rolled up towel or blanket under your arm but otherwise, try to keep it simple and relaxed.

~ Jeanette Mesite Frem