“Nipple confusion” is one of those terms that health professionals and experienced moms throw around in intimidating fashion. But what is it exactly, why is it bad, and how can it be avoided?

Nipple confusion is better defined as nipple preference, and it happens when a baby learns to prefer bottle feeding to breastfeeding. This can happen when baby has not had the opportunity to establish the correct mouth movements needed for breastfeeding and develops a preference for an artificial nipple.

When your baby first latches on to breastfeed, a series of shorter sucks are needed to trigger your body’s let-down and get milk flowing. Most bottle nipples, on the other hand, drip out liquid when tipped over. It’s much easier for babies to get liquid that way than when they’re breastfeeding, which leads to nipple preference.

How do you avoid nipple preference? Experts recommend avoiding artificial nipples/bottles and pacifiers for the first four weeks of your baby’s life in order to establish your milk supply and nursing routine. When you do introduce a bottle, using a nipple that is designed especially for a breastfed baby – like Lansinoh’s NaturalWave® Nipple – will allow your baby to use these same sucking actions that have worked for them at the breast and therefore will not confuse baby when they return to the breast. It’s not how the nipple looks, but how the baby interacts with it that matters most.

There are also options besides the standard bottle and artificial nipple that most moms don’t consider. If you’re especially concerned about nipple confusion, you can have a caregiver use a cup or even a straw cup to feed expressed breastmilk. Although these techniques are sometimes time-consuming and less popular in daycare settings when providers have multiple children to feed, they’re worth considering.

If you don’t have to use a bottle, don’t. Many moms only feed baby at the breast and that works great for them. For those moms who will be apart from their baby during a feeding, it is essential to find and use a nipple that will allow baby to return to the breast as seamlessly as possible so mom’s supply and the breastfeeding relationship is not interrupted. When you and baby are together, feed at the breast as often as you can.