

Expressing Milk Before Giving Birth

About prenatal breast milk expression

This handout explains why and how to express milk before having your baby. Talk with your provider before you start to hand express your breast milk, to make sure it is a good option for you.

What is prenatal breast milk expression?

In the 12th to 16th week of pregnancy, your breasts will start to produce an early form of breast milk called *colostrum*. Colostrum is a thick, yellowish-white fluid that provides extra nutrients to a newborn. Most women can start to collect this early breast milk at about 36 weeks gestation.

To hand express colostrum, follow the steps on pages 2 and 3 of this handout.

Why should I express milk before giving birth?

Expressing milk before your baby is born:

- Allows you to collect and store breast milk to feed to your newborn instead of formula, if needed for any reason
- May help your breast milk “come in” more quickly after birth

Learning prenatal breast milk expression can:

- Help you get to know your breasts
- Help you feel more ready for breastfeeding
- Increase your confidence that your breasts will provide food for your baby
- Save time and frustration after your baby is born



Learning to hand express breast milk is one way to help you get ready for your baby's birth.

Why would I hand express after my baby is born?

After birth, you can use hand expression:

- To encourage your baby to latch on. The smell and taste of your breast milk can help your baby open their mouth wide.
- To increase your milk supply. This can be very helpful if your baby is sleepy and not breastfeeding well.
- To deal with full breasts, so your baby can latch on well.

Is it safe to do prenatal breast milk expression?

Healthcare providers used to think that prenatal breast milk expression would increase the risks of preterm labor, abdominal contractions, and vaginal bleeding in the mother. They were also concerned that prenatal expression could decrease fetal movement and increase the risk that the baby would need care in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) after birth.

But, a recent study followed women who hand expressed breast milk starting at 36 weeks gestation. The women in this study did **not** have an increased risk of their babies being born early. And, there was **no increase** in the number of infants admitted to the NICU among these women.

Before you start expressing milk, talk with your provider to make sure you are at low risk for preterm birth and other pregnancy problems.

What problems should I watch for?

Stop doing prenatal breast milk expression and call your doctor if you have any of these symptoms:

- 6 or more contractions in 1 hour
- Stomach cramps, or cramps that feel like your period
- Lower backache
- A feeling of pressure in your stomach or pelvic area
- Increase in vaginal discharge – it may be watery, mucus-like, or bloody
- Your baby is moving less than before
- Signs of low blood sugar, especially if you have diabetes

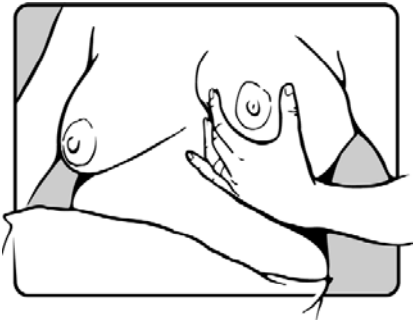
To learn more, please read our handout, “Recognizing Preterm Labor and Preventing Preterm Birth.” You can access the handout online at https://healthonline.washington.edu/document/health_online/pdf/WIY-Recognizing-Preterm-Labor.pdf

How do I do prenatal breast milk expression?

For best results, practice hand expression after you take a warm bath or shower. Hand express 2 times a day, once in the morning and once in the evening. Each time you express, spend about 5 minutes on each breast, for a total of 10 minutes.

To hand express breast milk, follow these steps:

1. Gather your supplies. You will need:
 - A clean spoon or small container
 - A small syringe
 - A plastic Ziploc bag
 - A label with your name and the date you expressed the milk
2. Wash your hands.
3. Massage one of your breasts toward the nipple for a few minutes.
4. Then, “walk” your fingers down your breast toward the nipple. Stop where you feel a change in the breast tissue. This will be about 1 to 1½ inches before you reach the nipple.
5. Place your thumb above the nipple and your fingers below the nipple in a “U” or “C” shape (see drawing at left).
6. Press back toward your chest wall and then press your thumb and finger toward each other. Do **not** squeeze the nipple itself, since you can make it sore.
7. Repeat the squeezing motion a few times until some drops of milk appear. Collect the milk on the spoon or in the small container. Then suck up the milk into the syringe.
8. When no more drops appear, move your fingers around and try a different part of the breast. Repeat until no more drops appear.
9. Follow steps 3 through 8 with the other breast.
10. Place the syringe containing your breast milk in the refrigerator. Use the same syringe to collect your breast milk later that day.
11. At the end of the day:
 - Label the syringe with your name and the date.
 - Place the syringe in the Ziploc bag. You will use a different syringe every day, but you can place more than one syringe in the same bag.
 - Place the bag with the syringe(s) in the freezer.



Place your thumb above the nipple and your fingers below the nipple.

What if I cannot express milk?

Hand expression is a skill that needs to be practiced. Your first tries will often produce very little milk. Practice every day for a few days. If there is still no milk, try again next week.

Over time and with practice, it will get easier and faster to hand express. You will also see an increase in the amount of breast milk you express. If you need more syringes and labels, please ask your clinic staff.

How can I learn more?

You may want to watch one or more of these videos:

- “Expressing the First Milk” by Global Health Media:
<https://globalhealthmedia.org/portfolio-items/expressing-the-first-milk/?portfolioID=5623>
- “Early Hand Expression Increases Later Milk Production” by Stanford Breastfeeding: <https://med.stanford.edu/newborns/professional-education/breastfeeding/hand-expressing-milk.html>
- “The Basics of Breast Massage and Hand Expression” by Maya Bolman:
<https://vimeo.com/73054360>

How do I store breast milk?

This table shows how long you can safely store breast milk.

<i>When breast milk is:</i>	<i>It is safe for:</i>
Room temperature Freshly expressed only.	6 hours
Refrigerated at 36 to 40°F (2.2 to 4.4°C)	Up to 6 days
Frozen The freezer must have its own door, and not open when the refrigerator is opened.	6 months
Deep frozen at 0°F (-17.8°C)	12 months
Thawed, but not warmed up Thawing should be done inside the refrigerator, for about 12 hours.	24 hours in the refrigerator (do not refreeze)
Warmed for a feeding Place in medium-warm water to heat. Do not boil or heat in a microwave.	1 hour

How do I take my expressed milk to the hospital when I am in labor?

- Place the Ziploc bags containing the frozen syringes in an insulated bag with some frozen gel packs.
- Do **not** use ice cubes to keep the milk frozen. Ice will make the milk thaw faster.
- As soon as you arrive at the hospital, ask a nurse to put the breast milk in a freezer.

When are breastfed infants given formula?

Breastfed infants may be given formula if their mothers have problems breastfeeding. These problems may be related to:

- Large blood loss during delivery
- Delay in first holding the infant or in the first breastfeeding, or not being able to be with their baby for some reason

A breastfed baby may also be given formula if:

- The baby has low blood sugar. This is often due to the mother having diabetes in pregnancy.
- The baby is small or large for their gestational age.
- The baby is born early.
- There is a delay in the mother's milk coming in.
- The mother's breast milk production is low. To learn more about low milk production, please read our handout, "Low Milk Production": http://healthonline.washington.edu/document/health_online/pdf/Low-Milk-Production.pdf.

If you have one of the situations listed above, your baby could be given the prenatally expressed breast milk you bring to the hospital. This would be done after you breastfeed, if possible. Having your expressed breast milk may keep us from having to supplement with formula.

What are the risks of giving breastfed newborns some formula in the hospital?

When a newborn receives formula from a bottle in the hospital, it can:

- Lead to less exclusive breastfeeding 1 to 2 months after birth, and to mothers no longer breastfeeding at all when their baby is 2 months old.
- Disrupt a mother's milk supply, especially if the mother doesn't express her milk.
- Lead to problems with getting a good latch onto the breast.

