

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 milk expression?

In the 12th to 16th week of pregnancy, your breasts will start to produce an early form of milk called *colostrum*. Colostrum is a thick, yellowish-white fluid that provides nutrients to a newborn before milk increases or “comes in.”

Your own colostrum has the very best early nutrition for your baby. Most patients can start to collect this early breast milk around the 36th week of pregnancy.

Why should I express milk before giving birth?

Expressing milk before your baby is born:

- Lets you collect and store your breast milk to feed to your baby instead of donor milk or formula, if needed for any reason
- May help your breast milk come in more quickly after birth

Learning prenatal milk expression can:

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

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 own milk can help your baby open their mouth wide.
- **Increase your milk supply.** This can be very helpful if your baby is sleepy and not chest/breastfeeding well.
- **Deal with engorged or full breasts.** Engorged breasts can be painful for you and make it difficult for your baby to latch. Hand expression can help with this by removing milk from your breast.



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

Is it safe to express milk before birth?

Healthcare providers used to think that hand-expressing milk before the baby is born could cause problems. They worried it might cause early labor, belly cramps, or bleeding. They were also concerned it could cause the baby to move less or increase the chance the baby would need special care after birth.

But a recent study looked at parents who started expressing breast milk at 36 weeks pregnant. The study showed that these parents were not more likely to have their babies early, and their babies were not more likely to go to the NICU (Neonatal Intensive Care Unit).

Before you start expressing milk, talk with your provider. They will check to make sure you are at low risk for early birth or other problems in your pregnancy.

What problems should I watch for?

Stop expressing milk 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
- Pain in your lower back
- 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

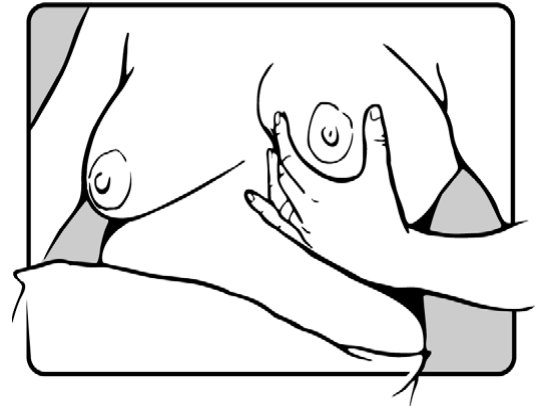
How to Do Prenatal Breast Milk Expression

- Express 2 times each day: 1 time in the morning and 1 time in the evening. Each time, spend about 5 minutes on each breast (10 minutes total).
- Try doing it after a warm bath or shower to help the milk flow.

Step-by-step Instructions

1. **Get your supplies ready.** You will need:
 - A clean spoon or small container
 - A small syringe (1 to 3 mL size, with a cap)
 - A plastic Ziploc bag
 - A label with your name and the date
2. **Wash your hands.**
3. **Massage.** Gently massage 1 of your breasts toward the nipple for a few minutes.

4. **Find the right spot.** Use your fingers to “walk” down your chest toward the nipple. Stop when you feel a change in the tissue. This is usually about 1 to 1½ inches before the nipple.
5. **Position your hand.** Make a “C” or “U” shape with your thumb and fingers. Place your thumb above the nipple and your fingers below the nipple (see drawing on the right).
6. **Express the milk.** Press back toward your chest, then press your thumb and finger toward each other. Do not squeeze the nipple itself because squeezing can make it sore.
7. **Collect the drops.** Keep pressing gently until you see drops of milk. Let the drops fall into the spoon or container. Then pull the milk up into the syringe.
8. **Try different spots.** When the milk stops, move your fingers around and try a different part of the breast. Keep trying until no more drops appear.
9. **Repeat with your other breast.** Follow steps 3 to 8 on the other side.



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

Storing Your Milk

- After each session, put the syringe with your milk in the refrigerator. You can reuse the same syringe throughout the day.
- At the end of the day:
 - Label the syringe with your name and the date.
 - Put the syringe in a Ziploc bag. You will use a new syringe each day, but it is okay to put your syringes in the same bag.
 - Put the bag in the freezer.

What if I don't get any milk?

Hand expression takes practice. It's normal to get only a few drops at first, or sometimes no milk at all. Don't worry, and keep trying! It is still helpful to practice even if there is no milk.

Try 1 time each day for a few days. If no milk comes out, take a break and try again next week.

With time and practice it will get easier and faster to hand-express. You will also likely see more milk come out as your body gets used to it.

How do I take my expressed milk to the hospital to be used after the birth?

- Label the bags with your name and put the Ziploc bags with your frozen syringes into an insulated bag with frozen gel packs.
- Do **not** use ice cubes. Ice will make the milk thaw faster.
- We can keep your milk in a freezer until your baby is born and ready to be given your milk.

When are babies given donor milk or formula?

Sometimes babies need a supplement (extra milk) if chest/breastfeeding is not enough at first. Your milk supply may be low or slow to come in if:

- You lost a lot of blood during delivery and are making very little colostrum (early milk)
- There was a delay in your first feeding or in holding your baby
- You are not able to be with your baby right away

Your baby may also need a supplement if they:

- Have low blood sugar. This is more common if you had diabetes during pregnancy.
- Are smaller or larger than expected.
- Are born early.

If any of these things happen, your baby may be able to use the expressed milk you brought to the hospital. This milk can be given to the baby with a dropper or another gentle way that supports your chest/breastfeeding goals. Having your expressed breast milk may mean your baby does not need another supplement.

Why This Matters

Giving a newborn baby a bottle in the hospital can affect feeding later on. Studies show:

- Babies who get formula in the hospital chest/breastfeed less often at 2 months old.
- Formula can lower your milk supply, especially if you are not expressing milk regularly.
- It may cause latching problems, making it harder for the baby to feed at the breast.
- Formula can also change the baby's gut health. In the first 7 days, it may lower the amount of good bacteria in their stomach and intestines. These good bacteria help to fight off germs and infections.

Learning and Support

Feeding your baby is a journey that takes patience and support. Everyone's experience is unique, and we are here to help you through any challenges or questions along the way.

These videos will give you more information and show examples of hand expression.

- ["Expressing the First Milk," by Global Health Media](#)
- ["The Basics of Breast Massage and Hand Expression," by Maya Bolman](#)
- med.stanford.edu/newborns/professional-education/breastfeeding/hand-expressing-milk.html

How long can I store expressed milk?

Storage Locations and Temperatures			
Type of Breast Milk	Counter 77 °F (25 °C) or colder (room temperature)	Refrigerator 40 °F (4 °C)	Freezer 0 °F (-18 °C) or colder
Freshly expressed or pumped	Up to 4 hours	Up to 4 days	Within 6 months is best. Up to 12 months is okay.
Thawed, previously frozen	1-2 hours	Up to 1 day (24 hours)	NEVER refreeze human milk after it has been thawed.
If baby did not finish the bottle	Use within 2 hours after the baby is done feeding		

Questions?

Your questions are important. Call your provider or send a message through MyChart if you have questions or concerns.