

Lactation After the Loss of an Infant

When your body produces milk

This handout is for women who have lost an infant. It explains your choices in dealing with lactation.

What to Expect

Mothers who suffer the loss of an infant may be shocked to find that their bodies still *lactate* (produce breast milk). This can happen even when the infant is lost only 16 weeks into a pregnancy. It is very common after about 18 weeks gestation.

What to Do

Losing an infant is devastating. For many women, *lactation* (producing milk) after losing their baby adds to their pain.

Some mothers may want to slowly stop lactating. Others may choose to express their milk and donate it to others who are in need.



You can choose to stop or continue lactation after your loss.

If You Want Your Body to Stop Making Milk

- Wear a supportive bra, but make sure it is not too tight. Breast binding can be very painful. It can also lead to infection.
- Relieve pain and swelling by putting cold compresses or ice packs over your breasts. Do this for 5 to 15 minutes at a time.
- You can also wear cold cabbage leaves inside your bra. To do this:
 - Wash and dry fresh, green cabbage leaves. Cut out any large, bumpy veins. Keep the leaves in the refrigerator until needed.
 - Place the cold leaves inside your bra on all sides of your breasts. Change the leaves every 2 hours or when they become limp. Throw used leaves away.
 - Keep using the leaves until your breasts stop feeling too full.
- Take ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin, and others) as advised by your healthcare provider. These medicines will help reduce pain and inflammation.

- Try taking herbal remedies such as sage, parsley, and peppermint. Talk with your provider about these herbs.
- You can suppress lactation without medicine, but there are some drugs that can help. They act by reducing *prolactin*, the hormone involved in making milk. Talk with your provider about these drugs before deciding whether to use them.

Expressing Milk

Even if you want to suppress lactation, you may still need to remove some milk to prevent severe breast *engorgement* (swelling). This is most likely to be a problem for women who have lactated before.

Whenever your breasts feel too full:

- Massage your breasts
- Express a little milk by hand or with a breast pump
- Stand in a hot shower and let the water run over your breasts
- Sit in a warm bath and lean into the water

Do not express more milk than is needed for your comfort.

Expressing too much milk will encourage your body to make more milk.

If You Want to Keep Lactating

Expressing and donating your breast milk can have many physical and emotional benefits. For some women, it is an important part of their grieving and healing process.

The idea of pumping can bring up deep grief for many women. Those who feel drawn to the idea find comfort in being able to put their baby's milk to use.

There are different ways to donate breast milk:

- Some mothers share their milk through informal, community-based, mother-to-mother donation. If you do this, first research all the risks and benefits. Make sure all parties understand the pros and cons before they consent to this sharing.
- The safest and preferred way to donate milk is through a milk bank. Breast milk donated to milk banks is provided to premature babies in NICUs and very ill infants. This donation of breast milk can save lives.

Becoming a Donor to a Milk Bank

Becoming a donor to a milk bank involves a screening process. You will have a phone interview, a written questionnaire, and blood testing. You will also need to provide a letter from your doctor.

When you are approved to donate, the milk bank will waive the minimum donation amount. They will gratefully accept any amount of milk you are able to provide. If you are not approved to donate, some milk banks will still accept your milk and use it for research or training.

The closest milk bank to the Seattle area is the Pacific Northwest Mothers Milk Bank. Contact them for more information and next steps:

Pacific Northwest Mothers Milk Bank

www.nwmmb.org
417 SW 117th Ave, Suite 105
Portland, OR 97225
Phone: 503.469.0955
Fax: 503.469.0962
Email: info@nwmmb.org

To Learn More

La Leche League International

www.llli.org

“Breast Feeding - Weaning After Infant Loss”

by Children’s Mercy Hospitals and Clinics

www.childrensmc.org/library/uploadedFiles/childrensmcorg/Patients_and_Families/Your_Childs_Health/Health_and_Safety_Resources/Care_Cards/CMH-11-390p.pdf

“Weaning After Infant Loss”

by Children’s Minnesota

www.childrensmn.org/educationmaterials/childrensmn/article/15857/weaning-after-infant-loss/

Questions?

Your questions are important. Call Lactation Services if you have questions or concerns.

Weekdays from 7 a.m. to 3 p.m., call Childbirth Center Lactation Services: 206.668.2118.

After hours and on weekends and holidays, call 206.668.1882.