

Expressing your breastmilk antenatally



Who is this leaflet for?

This leaflet is aimed mainly at mothers with diabetes, although any expectant mother may find it useful. It provides information about expressing breastmilk antenatally (before birth). It explains the benefits of expressing, how to do it, and aims to answer some common questions.

It is known that exclusive breastfeeding (that means your baby has your milk and nothing else to eat or drink) for around the first 6 months has many health benefits.

What are the benefits?

Research shows that babies who are breastfed are less likely to develop childhood diabetes. It is thought that cow's milk (which is the main ingredient of formula milk) can trigger diabetes in some babies. This is probably more likely for your baby if you or your partner have diabetes. Therefore, it is very important that parents who are diabetic avoid giving their baby formula milk if at all possible until the baby is at least 6 months old.

Why is expressing so important for diabetic mothers?

If you are a mother with diabetes, in the first few hours after birth, your baby may have a short time when their blood sugar is low and so will need a little extra milk. To help prevent this drop in blood sugar you will be encouraged to give your baby frequent feeds. It is also very helpful if you have already expressed some of your breastmilk (the first breastmilk is called colostrum) so that it can also be given to your baby if they need extra milk, and so avoid the need to give formula milk.

What if I have Type 1 diabetes?

If you have Type 1 diabetes, you may find that your insulin requirements are lower when you are breastfeeding and that you need to eat more. If you have gestational diabetes, research has shown that you are less likely to go on to develop diabetes in later life if you breastfeed your baby.

How often can I express?

As often as you want to.

How much breastmilk will I get?

This will vary from mother to mother, from a few drops to a teaspoonful. This first breastmilk is very concentrated in nutrients and helps your baby to fight infections. This small amount is perfect for your new baby.

When can I start?

You can do this from 36-37 weeks. The antenatal clinic staff will give you some small syringes to store your breastmilk in.

How do I express my breastmilk?

The best way to do this in the antenatal period and the first few days after you have had your baby is by hand. Hand expressing milk simply means squeezing milk out of your breast, and this is how you do it:

1. Roll your nipple between your finger and thumb to make it stand out. Make a C-shape with your thumb and either your index or middle finger, and cup your breast.
2. Feel back from the end of the nipple to where the texture of your breast tissue feels different, as shown in Fig 1. This may be about 2-3cm from the nipple, and you are now touching the skin above the dense, milk-making tissue.
3. Holding your thumb and index finger in this C-shape, press back towards your rib cage, as in Fig 2.
4. Bring your finger and thumb together, so that they press into the milk-making tissue, and milk will begin to appear in droplets, as in Fig 3 – this shouldn't hurt.
5. Use a sterile cup, small bowl or egg cup to collect it, and try to build up a rhythm of pressing and releasing.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

6. Avoid sliding your fingers over the skin as this will hurt and it will be more difficult to express milk.
7. When the flow slows down, move your fingers and thumb around the breast, (like moving around the numbers on a clock face), or express from the other side. You can keep changing breasts until the milk slows down or stops. Express for about 20 minutes in total.

What should I look out for?

You may find that when you express you feel your womb going hard and relaxing – these are called 'Braxton Hicks' contractions. Don't worry about these, unless they begin to feel like period-type cramps or mild labour contractions. This is rare, but if it happens, stop expressing and rest. If they don't stop and you think you might be in early labour, telephone Delivery Suite on 01872 252361 as advised by your midwife.

Where should I store my expressed colostrum?

You will need to collect the milk in a clean container which you have sterilised, such as a small feeding cup, egg cup or plastic container. The antenatal clinic staff will provide you with small syringes and caps which you can use to store the milk in. The syringe can then be capped, labelled with your name, the date and time you expressed and put into a plastic box with a lid.

You can store milk in the fridge at a temperature of under 5°C for up to five days, or in the freezer for up to 6 months. If you do not know the temperature in your fridge at home then only store it for 48 hours.

It will depend on how soon you will have your baby as to how best to store your milk. If you start expressing at 36 weeks, it will probably be best to store that milk in the freezer. If you know you are going to be induced or delivered the next day, then you can store that milk in the fridge.

I am not diabetic but this sounds useful. Can I do this too?

Yes, any mother can hand express her breastmilk from 36-37 weeks. It would be particularly useful if you know before the birth that your baby is at risk of having a low blood sugar in the first few hours following birth, or may experience some difficulty feeding effectively.

For example:

- babies of mothers with severe pre-eclampsia
- babies of mothers who are taking beta-blockers to control their blood pressure (eg labetalol)
- babies that are thought to be small compared to other babies at the same stage of pregnancy, or those who are expected to be under the second centile when they are born
- babies who are twins or triplets
- babies who have been diagnosed antenatally with a condition which may impact on feeding, eg cleft lip and palate, heart abnormality, Down's Syndrome.

Don't forget to bring any breastmilk you have expressed with you when you come into hospital to have your baby. Let your midwife know you have it with you and she will arrange for it to be stored in the fridge/freezer on Wheal Fortune.

Any questions?

For more information, please contact your community midwife.

There is a hospital leaflet, 'Expressing your breast milk', which you may find useful.

There is also further information in the Real Baby Milk 'Essential Guide to Feeding and Caring for your Baby', a copy of which should be in the front of your green hand-held notes.

If you would like this leaflet in large print, braille, audio version or in another language, please contact the General Office on 01872 252690

