

Expressing your breast milk in pregnancy

Maternity Department



Patient information leaflet

Why do I need to express my breast milk?

Women start to produce colostrum (early milk) from 16 weeks of pregnancy. Learning to express colostrum can increase your confidence and ability to breastfeed. It is important that your baby receives only breast milk in the early days and if for any reason you and your baby are separated you will find it easier to express milk if you have practised before the birth. Any pregnant woman can hand express her milk from 36 weeks of pregnancy, especially if you know that your baby is at risk of having low blood sugars at birth or is likely to be small or early.

Who will benefit from expressing breast milk before the birth?

Everyone will benefit from hand expressing before birth but specifically:

- Women with Diabetes
- Multiple pregnancies (Twins or Triplets)
- Women who have had breast surgery or breast abnormalities
- Women with severe pre- eclampsia (high blood pressure)
- Previous negative experience/difficulty with breast feeding
- Planned caesarean section/induction of labour especially if your baby is going to be born early
- Babies who are known to have cleft lip or palate
- Babies who are thought to be small for dates or expected to be under 2500g at birth and also those that may be over 4500g
- Women who are overweight with a body mass index (BMI) – above 35

The above list is not exhaustive and if you would like to discuss antenatal hand expressing and your individual special circumstances, please contact you Midwife/Breastfeeding specialist.

Why is it so important for diabetic mothers?

Recent research has shown that babies who are breastfed are less likely to develop childhood diabetes. Colostrum and breast milk helps to stabilise blood sugar levels.

It is thought that cow's milk (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. In the first 48 hours, babies of diabetic mothers are at risk of developing low blood sugar levels and are more likely to be given formula milk to correct this. However, if you have already expressed some colostrum, this could be avoided and your own milk can be given instead.

What do I need to hand express my milk?

- Just yourself, a few 1-2 ml sterile oral syringes, something to seal the syringes (your midwife will provide these) and a plastic container to store the milk
- Make sure you are warm, relaxed and comfortable
- You could practise in a bath / shower as warmth often helps with expressing
- Wash your hands before you start to express

How do I hand express my breast milk?



(Courtesy of UNICEF Baby friendly initiative)

1. Gently massage your breasts (this should feel pleasant and not painful) for about 5 minutes.
2. Roll or gently tweak your nipple between your finger/thumb for 30 seconds.
3. Cup your breast and walk back with your thumb from the end of the nipple to where your breast tissue feels a different texture (sometimes described as lumpy peas!) This could be as far back as 3-4 cms from the base of the nipple.
4. Place your thumb and index finger opposite each other in a 'c' shape and gently press this area for a count of three (this should not hurt).
5. Release the pressure and then keeping your finger and thumb in the same spot repeat the action again and again until you see some drops of colostrum. Be patient as it may take a minute or two to appear.

AVOID sliding your fingers over your skin as this friction will make you sore.

The colostrum is very sticky and will come out in drops

6. If you don't see any colostrum, do not worry as expressing takes time and practice. Try moving your finger slightly further forward towards the nipple or further back to find the spot that works best for you.
7. When the flow slows down, move your fingers around your breast keeping your thumb and finger opposite each other and in a 'c' shape, so that you have expressed from all the way around your breast. Change to the other breast then repeat both breasts again.
8. Collect using your syringe. Hand expressing will usually take approximately 20 minutes. For further assistance contact your community Midwife or the midwife in Antenatal clinic.

Note You may find that when you express you feel your womb going hard and then relaxing – this is called 'Braxton Hicks' contractions. Don't worry about this, unless they begin to feel like period type cramps or mild labour contractions. This is rare, but if this happens, you should stop expressing and rest. If they don't stop and you think you might be in early labour, you should telephone the Delivery Suite as you have been advised to do by your Midwife.

Diabetic ladies

You may notice that your blood sugar levels drop once you start hand expressing due to you using up more energy. It is advisable to have slow release snacks overnight. If you find this is a problem, please discuss this with your diabetic team.

Colostrum can be saved from 36 weeks when it drips quite easily. Using a pump is not practical as you are only expressing small amounts and this will stick to the pump equipment. You can start hand expressing once a day, slowly increasing every 4–5 days to a maximum of 4 times daily. You will possibly find little and often works better once you are starting to collect the colostrum.

How do I store my expressed colostrum?

You will need to collect the milk in a clean container. The Antenatal Clinic staff or your midwife will provide you with small syringes which you can use to store the milk in. The syringe can then be put into a small plastic bag or clear plastic container and labelled with your name, and the date and time you expressed.

You can store the milk in the fridge at a temperature of 2-4°C for between three and 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 have your baby as to how best to store your milk. If you start expressing at 37 weeks it will probably be best to store that milk in the freezer. If you know you are going to be induced the next day, then you can store that milk in the fridge.

Transport to hospital

Bring your stored colostrum with you for delivery in a cool bag with ice packs – **inform the Midwife so that it can be stored in the “milk” freezer immediately to prevent defrosting.** Defrost one or two containers of colostrum at a time to avoid wastage.

What happens after the baby is born?

Your baby will need to breastfeed little and often, at least 8–12 times in 24 hours. Often on Day 1, they only feed 2-3 times and this is quite normal. Day 2 is the day they wake up and want to feed frequently! However if you or your baby have any of the previously mentioned conditions, they will be encouraged to feed regularly to prevent low blood sugars and further problems. You can use your expressed colostrum to maintain the levels within normal limits.

Once you have learnt to hand express, it is effective and free. It can be very useful for encouraging your baby to attach to the breast and feed and for keeping the breast free of blocked ducts, preventing further problems.

Key reference sources

- NICE guideline NG3
- www.gestationaldiabetes.co.uk

Visit the Colostrum Harvesting Clinic at Parent craft room

Royal Surrey County Hospital

Every Thursday 2–4pm, All welcome – just turn up.

Contact details

Do ask your midwife/Antenatal clinic
01483 464004 for more information

PALS and Advocacy contact details

Contact details of independent advocacy services can be provided by our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) who are located on the right hand side as you enter the main reception area. PALS are also your first point of contact for health related issues, questions or concerns surrounding RSCH patient services.

Telephone: 01483 402757

Email: rsc-tr.pals@nhs.net

Opening hours: 9.00am–3.00pm, Monday to Friday

If you would like information documents in large print, on tape or in another language or form please contact PALS.

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