

Information about antenatal hand expressing from 37 weeks

This information leaflet is for women who have been advised to hand express colostrum (the first breast milk you produce) when pregnant. Its aim is to answer some of the questions you may have about hand expressing breast milk while you are pregnant. If you have any further questions or concerns, please speak to your midwife or the breastfeeding team.

Why should I breastfeed my baby?

Breastfeeding is an excellent opportunity for you to bond with your baby from the very first moments of their life. Your breast milk is specifically produced for your own baby and it is readily available all the times you need it.

It will protect your baby from many diseases early and later on in life and it will help make your child healthier (for example, less chance of getting infections, reduces incidence of diabetes, obesity, heart disease, and better development of the brain than babies who are formula fed). It will also help protect you from breast and ovarian cancer and osteoporosis.

Also, the World Health Organisation (WHO) recommends that babies are exclusively breastfed for the first six months of their life. After six months babies should receive complementary food but you can still breastfeed until you and your baby decide to stop.

Why do I need to hand express before my baby is born?

You may have been asked to hand express before the birth of your baby for a number of reasons. However, it can take some time for you to learn how to breastfeed and hand express. Therefore we recommend that you learn some skills before your baby arrives and establish a small store of expressed colostrum ready to be given to your baby.

This will help to reduce the need for your baby to have formula milk. However, on occasions it may be medically advised for your baby to have other fluids or formula milk until there is an adequate supply of breast milk. If this happens, a member of staff will discuss your baby's individual needs and gain consent from you.

Your baby may have a medical condition requiring them to be cared for in the neonatal unit or Evelina Children's Hospital. Therefore your baby may not be able to feed from you and may be fed in an alternative way such as through a feeding tube or with medicated fluids.

Even if your baby is not going to feed from you at birth it is important to ensure your milk can be given once your baby is able to receive it.

You may have pre-existing diabetes or gestational diabetes that has developed in pregnancy. Babies born to mothers with diabetes may have some difficulties keeping their blood glucose at the right level.

Colostrum can help stabilise your baby's blood glucose so to help with this it is important for the baby to feed soon after birth and at regular intervals. We will check the baby's blood glucose level regularly. If it is lower than required a supplementary feed may be required. As it can take some time to establish breast feeding it is useful to have expressed breast milk to give them.

What will I be expressing?

If you express before birth, the milk you will produce is called colostrum. Colostrum is the thick and sticky base product of breast milk that you begin to produce during pregnancy and the first few days after birth. Its colour can range from almost see-through to yellow. It contains everything your baby needs in the first few days including proteins, fats and infection-fighting antibodies, and it will help stabilise your baby's blood glucose (sugar) levels.

Colostrum is produced in small quantities; we only expect you to produce very small amounts at a time, and this can mean less than a milliliter. A newborn baby's stomach is as big as a marble so they will just need a few millilitres of colostrum to be full and content.

How can I hand express?

The tips below should help you hand express:

- Make sure you are relaxed and you have some time ahead of you.
- You may find that a warm shower/bath helps to relax you.
- Wash your hands with soap and hot water, and then dry them with a clean towel.
- Make sure you have a sterile container, such as a syringe, ready to collect the colostrum.
- Gently massage your breast from the outer parts toward the nipples in all directions. This will help the hormone that releases the milk flow more easily.
- Position you index finger and thumb in a C shape behind the areola (the darker part of your breast around the nipple). You may feel a texture change under the skin, these are your milk ducts.
- Gently but firmly press your finger and thumb together without moving their position for about two seconds. Release the pressure and repeat again and again, building up a rhythm. Do not slide your fingers over the skin or nipple.
- When the flow slows down or stops, change the position of your finger and thumb, gradually moving them around the breast like a clock face. Then move to the next breast and repeat the process. If you aim to express from each breast at least twice per session you will be really maximising the amount of colostrum available to your baby.
- Once you are 37 weeks pregnant you can start off by hand expressing twice a day and when you are happy increase up to four times a day.
- Very occasionally expressing can stimulate mild contractions. If these occur each time you express then you need to stop expressing and contact your midwife for further information.

Because you will be expressing a small amount of thick sticky colostrum, a syringe tends to be the best thing to collect it. Your midwife will give you a supply of syringes and bungs. You can either take out the plunger and scoop the colostrum into the barrel of the syringe, with a bung on the end to stop it escaping. Or if you prefer, you can use the syringe to “suck up” the drops of colostrum.

Once you have expressed a few times you may find that you are producing more than the syringe can hold – if this is the case simply use a small-lidded sterile container (you can sterilise it using a home steriliser).

It can take a few attempts to obtain any colostrum – try not to get frustrated this is very normal!

How should I store the colostrum?

- Collect and store every single drop of colostrum you have expressed. Let none of it go to waste – it is very precious!
- You can store it in the syringe or container you collected it in, as long as it is sterile at the beginning. You can add to the container throughout the day as long as you store it in the fridge in between. Start a new container each day (24hrs)
- Label each bag/bottle with the date and time and freeze it.
- You can safely store it for up to six months if the freezer temperature is -18 degrees celsius or lower. If you don't have access to a freezer straight away, you can keep it at room temperature for six hours or in the fridge for up to 8 days at 4 degrees or below or 3–5 days if above 4 degrees or you are uncertain of the temperature.

How should I transport the colostrum into the hospital?

- Place the frozen colostrum in a cool bag with frozen packs to help maintain the cold temperature.
- Once you are in the hospital your milk can be put in the fridge or freezer, labelled with your name, time and date. You will have 12 hours to use the milk once it is defrosted, as long as it is stored in the fridge.
- If the milk is placed in the freezer it can be stored for 6 months
- If you leave it at room temperature you will have to use it immediately once it is defrosted.
- If you need to defrost it quickly you can place it under warm running water, and then use it immediately.

Your midwife will assist you and support you with all of the above as well as showing you how to give the colostrum to your baby.

Further information

Remember you can also hand express during your induction or labour – it may help to further stimulate your contractions.

Please discuss any questions or concerns at your next antenatal appointment. If you do not think you can hand express your colostrum, do not worry. We will help you to do it when and if needed once your baby is born.

Useful resources

Websites

www.gstt.nhs.uk/breastfeeding: information on infant feeding and breastfeeding groups in the community. There are also links to various resources including the Pregnancy and Life with Your Baby folder that you might have seen in clinic or the hospital.

www.your-baby.org.uk: lots of information and short films about getting to know your baby.

www.bestbeginnings.co.uk: lots of information about feeding, plus short “how to” films

www.isisonline.org.uk: evidence-based information about babies’ sleep patterns, safer sleep and use of slings

Apps

Breast Start lists local groups and breastfeeding friendly venues as well as information about breastfeeding and expressing.

Baby buddy takes you through your pregnancy to life with your baby, using interactive information and films.

Contact us

Please contact your allocated midwife or team for further information. The breastfeeding team can be contacted by email at breastfeedingteam@gstt.nhs.uk. For more information leaflets on conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/leaflets

Pharmacy Medicines Helpline

If you have any questions or concerns about your medicines, please speak to the staff caring for you or call our helpline.

t: 020 7188 8748 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday

Your comments and concerns

For advice, support or to raise a concern, contact our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS). To make a complaint, contact the complaints department.

t: 020 7188 8801 (PALS) e: pals@gstt.nhs.uk

t: 020 7188 3514 (complaints) e: complaints2@gstt.nhs.uk

Language and Accessible Support Services

If you need an interpreter or information about your care in a different language or format, please get in touch:

t: 020 7188 8815 e: languagesupport@gstt.nhs.uk

NHS 111

Offers medical help and advice from fully trained advisers supported by experienced nurses and paramedics. Available over the phone 24 hours a day. t: 111

NHS Choices

Provides online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you make choices about your health. w: www.nhs.uk

Leaflet number: 2491/VER2

Date published: November 2016

Review date: November 2019

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