

Expressing colostrum in pregnancy (harvesting your colostrum)

Learning to hand express your colostrum before birth is a great way to prepare for your breastfeeding journey. By expressing your colostrum towards the end of your pregnancy you will be better prepared to meet any feeding challenges should they arise.

SAFETY MESSAGE: if you have collected your colostrum in syringes please note that they may have caps on the end to secure the liquid. These caps **MUST BE REMOVED** before giving the milk to the baby, so ensure birth partners understand this too. If your syringes do not have caps, just keep the syringes flat until frozen and keep in the outside packaging. Ask clinical staff to show you how to give your expressed milk to your baby.

Colostrum: First type of milk

Colostrum is the first milk a pregnant woman produces and this is present from around 16 weeks of pregnancy. Colostrum is a concentrated, sticky, yellowish substance which is easy to digest, helps to clear your baby's first poo (meconium), reduces jaundice, **and is full of antibodies to help protect your baby from infection.** It is small in quantity but is everything your baby needs in the first few days of life. If you have known risk factors (see below), we would strongly recommend harvesting colostrum antenatally, but it can be useful for anyone to try. Some mothers like to have a store of colostrum in preparation for birth just in case they, or their baby, are unwell or separated following birth. Even without these issues, it is common for babies to take time to breastfeed efficiently. Having the colostrum in advance minimises the chance of any delay in a baby receiving their mothers' milk and the need for formula use. It also helps you to learn a valuable skill for managing future breastfeeding challenges and stimulates production of breastmilk.

Strongly recommended if you:

- Have diabetes.
- Are receiving additional care or ultrasound scans due to the growth of their baby, large or small.
- Are taking Beta-blocker medication e.g. Labetalol.
- Have a planned Caesarean birth or an induced birth.
- Are expecting twins or multiples.
- Are anticipated to need Special Care admission.
- Are expected to have cleft lip or palate.
- Have a family history of metabolic disorders e.g. MCADD.
- Have any other medical conditions where challenges are anticipated (please discuss with your healthcare professional).

However, you should **avoid** expressing if you are at risk of **pre-term labour**.

Compassionate

Aspirational

Resourceful

Excellent

How can I express my colostrum?

You can begin expressing by hand (more effective at capturing your milk than by using a pump) a few times a day, from 36 weeks of pregnancy (or before by arrangement). It helps to be warm and relaxed – practice in the shower/bath or when watching TV or listening to music when you first try. Ensure your hands are washed, then massage your breast to aid the flow. This can be gentle stroking, just to encourage the release of hormones. Cup your breast and place your thumb and finger about 2-3cm from the base of the nipple. Try and feel a change of texture in the breast tissue, some women describe a ‘ridge’ or ‘gap’, these are your milk ducts. Using your thumb and fingers in a C shape, apply gentle pressure, and build up a rhythm, pressing, holding and releasing. Repeat this again and again, avoiding sliding your fingers over your skin. Collect any colostrum (droplets at first) on a clean sterile teaspoon, (you can sterilise this by immersing in boiling water for 10mins). When the flow slows, rotate your thumb and forefinger around the breast and repeat. If you do not see any colostrum, try widening, or narrowing, your thumb and forefinger and /or push back into your chest wall and then press hold and release as before. Try swapping back and forth between breasts and repeating massage.

If no colostrum is expressed it does not mean that there is a lack of production, it just means that on that occasion the colostrum was not ‘let-down’ or that you need to practice the technique. If that happens, try at a different time or day, or perhaps when you are more relaxed. Sometimes the first attempts just produce a tiny drop, too small even to collect. Don’t worry this will increase if you keep trying.

Store your ‘harvested colostrum’ in a freezer in small sterile containers to bring in once your baby is born. For high risk cases the hospital can provide you with a small pot which you can freeze and add to in a layer effect. Store in your freezer, in a see-through bag, label with your full name, and date of birth and date of expression. When you come into hospital, bring some in, in an insulated cool bag with ice packs, and let the midwives know so it can be placed in our freezer. It is crucial that it stays frozen as it will thaw quickly and we do not know when exactly you will need it! Remember to mention to staff that you have some colostrum if there are feeding challenges and to take it home again if it’s not needed.

If you are interested in expressing during pregnancy, please speak to your community midwife,

- Watch the infant feeding class currently available on YouTube.com “Pregnancy feeding workshop” and take a look at the other short videos so that you can build a relationship with your baby
- Read the ‘Off to the best start’ leaflet (<https://www.unicef.org.uk/babyfriendly/baby-friendly-resources/leaflets-and-posters/off-to-the-best-start/>)
- Take a look at these expressing videos : <https://www.unicef.org.uk/babyfriendly/baby-friendly-resources/video/hand-expression/>
- Global Health media one on you tube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=axQi5PqRZ0M>
- Follow the links on the M&B app: “Getting ready for Birth.... Thinking about feeding your baby... Hand Expressing before your baby is born”
- Watch our videos on the Royal Berkshire Maternity Facebook® page.

Hand expressing in pregnancy can be a great tool for you to prepare for breastfeeding.

However, if you do not wish to express, please rest assured that it is not vital to successful

breastfeeding. Also, if you try hand expressing but do not obtain any colostrum this does mean that there is anything wrong, nor does it mean your body won't be able to produce enough breast milk for your baby after birth.

Contact information

For further information ask your community midwife, or contact our infant feeding advisors by emailing the infant feeding team at infantfeeding.team@royalberkshire.nhs.uk

References

1. Ballarat Health Services (2010) The ante natal expression of colostrum Catalogue No 731074
2. Cox SG (2010) An ethical dilemma. Should recommending antenatal expressing and storing of colostrum's continue? Breastfeeding review 18 (3) 5 – 7.
3. NICE Guideline NG3 (2015) <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng3> “Off to the best start” leaflet (Unicef 2015)
4. Video clip for expressing Unicef (www.babyfriendly.org.uk/parents/resources/audiovisual)
5. Global Health media <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=axQi5PqRZ0M>
6. Mother and Baby App M&B

To find out more about our Trust visit www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk

Please ask if you need this information in another language or format.

Infant Feeding Team Lead,

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Next review due: July 2024