

Expressing colostrum in pregnancy (harvesting your colostrum)

Learning to hand express your colostrum in pregnancy 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.

Colostrum: First type of milk

Colostrum is the first milk a pregnant woman will produce and this is produced 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. By having the colostrum in advance it minimises the chance of any delay in a baby receiving their mothers' milk.

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.

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 a funny film or TV show when you first try. Ensure your hands are washed then massage your breast to aid the flow. Then cup your breast and place your thumb and finger about 2-3cm from the base of the nipple. 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.

If no colostrum is expressed it does not mean that there is no colostrum it just means that on that occasion the colostrum was not let-down. If that happens, try at a different time of day or on a different day.

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, date of birth and date of expression. When coming 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. Remember to take it home again if it’s not needed.

If you are interested in expressing during pregnancy, please speak to your community midwife, and to find out more:

- Watch the infant feeding class (www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk/wards-and-services/infant-feeding.htm) 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 not mean your body is not producing any, 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 or telephone on 0118 322 8314.

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 colostrums 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

More information is available on the Trust website: www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk

This document can be made available in other languages and formats upon request.

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