

Hand Expressing Breast Milk Before Your Baby is Born

Breast milk is the best food for your baby. Babies should not have anything but breast milk for the first 6 months of life, if possible.

Colostrum is the breast milk that your body makes during your pregnancy and for the first few days after your baby's birth. Colostrum can be clear to golden yellow in colour and is often very thick. It is produced in small amounts, but it is usually all your baby needs during the first few days after birth.

Sometimes your baby may need supplementation (extra nutrition) in the first few days of life. You can give them more colostrum so that you don't have to use other forms of supplementation, such as formula.

Babies who are more likely to need supplementation include:

- › babies born to mothers with diabetes, thyroid disease, or other hormonal imbalances, such as polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS)
- › babies born to mothers who have had breast surgery
- › babies born to mothers with a history of low breast milk supply
- › babies born via cesarean section (C-section)
- › preterm and small babies

It is important to learn how to hand express your breast milk. Hand expression is the **best** way to remove the colostrum from your breasts while you are pregnant. Hand expression works much better than using a pump during this time.

You should learn how to hand express your breast milk at about 36 weeks of pregnancy. At 37 weeks, you can start collecting your colostrum to bring to the hospital with you when your baby is born. This video will show you how to hand express:

- › www.healthyfamiliesbc.ca/home/articles/video-hand-expressing-breastmilk

Remember to bring your colostrum when you come to the hospital to give birth. This can be easy to forget when you are distracted by labour. You may wish to leave a note on your hospital bag to remind you.

Bring your colostrum in an insulated bag and/or cooler using ice and/or ice packs to keep it cold and remember to give it to your nurse when you arrive at the hospital. It will be kept in a freezer and will be ready for you as needed.

How to hand express breast milk (you may wish to follow along with the video when you are first learning):

1. Always wash your hands before hand expressing or handling your expressed colostrum.
2. Placing a wet warm cloth on your breasts a few minutes before starting may make expressing easier.
3. Gently stimulate your breasts by massaging the breast toward the nipple. Gently roll or tug on your nipple. This will also help to make expression easier.
4. Place your thumb and index finger in a C-shape just outside the dark area of your nipple (areola).
5. Push your thumb and index finger back towards your chest and gently squeeze, then release the pressure.
6. Repeat this squeezing then releasing in a rhythmic way until drops of milk appear. Move your hand all the way around your areola so that you reach all of the milk ducts.

Hand expression is a learned skill. It will get easier with practice. Don't worry if you don't get a lot of colostrum. Getting only a few drops is normal.

7. As drops of milk appear, you can collect them directly into a syringe, or collect them into the small cup provided, then add them to the syringe when you're done. Remember to put the cap on the end of the syringe so the colostrum stays clean.
8. Repeat steps 1-8 on your other breast. You can hand express each breast for 2-3 minutes, 2 times each day.

Oxytocin (a hormone) is released when your breasts are stimulated during hand expression. Oxytocin also causes your uterus (place where your baby grows) to contract in labour. If you notice any cramping in your uterus when hand expressing, it is very important that you stop and talk with your doctor before starting again. This is rare. Some mothers breastfeed their other children during their pregnancy with no problems.

9. Start a new syringe each day. Keep the colostrum that you express for the first time each day in the fridge. Make sure that any other colostrum you express that same day cools to room temperature before adding it to the syringe. At the end of each day, label the syringe with your name and the date it was collected. You may notice you are expressing more colostrum each day.
10. Within 24 hours of collection, put the syringe in the freezer. **Never add fresh colostrum to frozen colostrum.**