

# 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. It:

- › can be clear to golden yellow in colour.
- › is often very thick.
- › is produced in small amounts, but it is usually all your baby needs during the first few days after birth.

Your baby may need supplementation (extra nutrition) for the first few days after birth. You can give them more colostrum so that you do not have to use other forms of supplementation (like formula).

Babies who are more likely to need supplementation include:

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

**What are your questions?  
Please ask. We are here to help you.**

**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 and in the first few days after your baby's birth. Hand expression works much better than using a pump during these times.

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 shows how to hand express:

- › [www.healthlinkbc.ca/pregnancy-parenting/parenting-babies-0-12-months/breastfeeding/video-hand-expressing-breastmilk](http://www.healthlinkbc.ca/pregnancy-parenting/parenting-babies-0-12-months/breastfeeding/video-hand-expressing-breastmilk)

**Remember to bring your colostrum with you 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 or cooler using ice and/or ice packs to keep it cold. Remember to give it to your nurse when you arrive at the hospital. It will be kept in a freezer and will be ready when needed.**

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

Placing a wet, warm cloth on your breasts a few minutes before starting may make expressing easier. Practicing hand expressing each day in the shower before you start collecting may also help.

- 1. Always wash your hands before hand expressing or handling your expressed colostrum.**
2. Gently stimulate one breast by massaging it toward the nipple. Gently roll or tug on your nipple. This will help to make expression easier.
3. Place your thumb and index finger in a C-shape just outside the dark area of your nipple (areola).
4. Push your thumb and index finger back towards your chest and gently squeeze. Then release the pressure.
5. Keep squeezing and releasing in a rhythmic way until drops of milk appear. Move your hand all the way around the areola so that you reach all of the milk ducts.

**Hand expression is a learned skill. It will get easier with practice. Do not worry if you do not get a lot of colostrum. It is normal to only get a few drops.**

6. As drops of milk appear, you can collect them:

- › directly into a syringe.

**OR**

- › into the small cup you were given. Then add them to the syringe when you are done.

**When you are done collecting, remember to put the cap on the end of the syringe to protect the colostrum from germs.**

7. Repeat steps 1 to 6 on your other breast.

You can hand express each breast for 3 to 5 minutes, 2 to 3 times a 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 during labour. If you notice any cramping in your uterus when hand expressing, it is very important to stop and talk with your doctor before starting again. This is rare. It is safe to keep breastfeeding your older child while pregnant.**

8. **Use a new syringe each day.** Label the syringe with your name and the date it was collected. 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 you add it to the syringe.

You may notice you are expressing more colostrum each day.

9. Within 24 hours (1 day) of collection, put the syringe in the freezer. **Never add fresh colostrum to frozen colostrum.**

# Questions for my health care provider:

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For more information, go to <http://library.novascotia.ca>  
Connect with a registered nurse in Nova Scotia any time: call 811 or visit <https://811.novascotia.ca>  
Learn about other programs and services in your community: call 211 or visit <http://ns.211.ca>

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*Prepared by: Maternal Child Provincial Policy Working Group  
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