

Expressing Your Milk

What is expressed milk?

Human milk that has been hand expressed or pumped from the breast so that it can be given to your baby by spoon, cup or bottle.

You may want to express your milk if:

- your baby can't feed at your breast because he's sick or in the special care nursery, or for another reason
- you need a few drops of milk to rub on your nipples to keep them healthy
- you need to soften your very full breasts so your baby can latch well
- you're trying to interest your baby in latching
- you're trying to increase or keep up your milk supply
- you'll be away from your baby for longer than a few hours
- your partner will be feeding the baby
- you're going back to work



DID YOU KNOW

If your baby was born prematurely, you can help him get the best start on breastfeeding by:

- learning how to hand express colostrum early
- expressing and pumping your milk often
- holding your baby skin-to-skin as much as possible
- offering your breast as soon as your baby is stable (see [Special Birth Issues](#))

How to Express Your Milk

You can express your milk:

1. by hand
2. with a hand pump
3. with an electric pump

Helpful hints:

- Before you start, wash your hands and get comfortable.
- Gently massage your breast before expressing to help the milk let down.
- Be patient. Expressing is quicker for some people than others. It can take a bit of time before the first drops appear. And at first, you may only be able to get a few drops or none at all. This will increase with practice and as your milk supply builds.
- Try putting a warm, wet cloth on your breast or taking a warm shower to help your milk begin to flow.

Expressing, like breastfeeding, takes practice and support. You can practise as soon as your baby is born, or even before. If you need help, talk with your health care provider or public health nurse or call HealthLink BC at 8-1-1.



DID YOU KNOW

Hand expression is the best way to collect colostrum – your first, nutrient-rich milk.

Using your hands

You don't need any special equipment to express your milk. Hand expressing is an important skill, but it takes practice. With time, you'll figure out what works best for you.



HOW TO

Express your milk by hand

1. Wash your hands well.
2. Hold your baby skin-to-skin.
3. Gently massage your breasts to help start the flow of milk.
4. Hold your breast with one hand. Your thumb and fingers should be opposite each other and about 2½ to 4 cm (1 to 1½ inches) back from the nipple.
5. Place a clean container with a wide opening in front of you or hold it under your breast to catch the milk.
6. Press back toward your chest wall. Don't squeeze the base of your nipple, as this will stop the flow of milk.
7. Relax your fingers, then repeat the same motion.
8. Move your hand around to express from your entire breast. Switch your hands and breasts as often as you like.

Using a pump

You can use a hand pump or an electric pump. An electric pump may let you express both breasts at the same time, is faster and more efficient, and may be the best choice if you'll be expressing milk often. Whichever you use, be sure to follow the manufacturer's instructions about how to use and clean it.

Thinking of renting, borrowing or buying a used breast pump?

Most pumps are very hard to disinfect and are not meant to be used by more than one person. Your health care provider can help you find the best option for you.



DID YOU KNOW

If your baby is given a bottle, he may start to refuse your breast. If you're going to offer your expressed milk, it's best to wait until you and your baby have settled into a breastfeeding routine – usually around 4 to 6 weeks.



DID YOU KNOW

With a cooler and frozen gel packs, you can safely transport expressed human milk for up to 24 hours. Use gel packs – not regular ice, which isn't as cold. Make sure the gel packs are in direct contact with the milk container. And don't open the cooler if you don't need to. If you're transporting milk to or from a milk bank, follow their instructions.

Storing Your Milk

Put your expressed milk in feeding-sized portions into clean, food-grade, BPA-free bags or containers with lids. Don't use baby bottle liners, which can break. Leave extra space for the milk to expand as it freezes, then label it with the date and time and store it in the main compartment (not the door) of the fridge or in the freezer. You can add freshly expressed milk to older milk that has never been frozen, but be sure to cool the new milk first.

How long can you safely store freshly expressed human milk?*

	Freshly expressed milk	Milk thawed in fridge, but not warmed
Room temperature 20°C (68°F)	up to 6 hours	up to 4 hours
Refrigerator 0 to 4°C (32 to 39°F)	up to 5 days	up to 24 hours
Freezer (separate door freezer on fridge) -18°C (-0.4°F)	up to 6 months	Do not refreeze
Deep freezer -20°C (-4°F)	up to 12 months	

*These recommendations are for healthy full-term babies only. If your baby was born prematurely or has a health condition, safe storage times are much shorter. Talk with your health care provider or call HealthLink BC at 8-1-1.



TRY THIS

If you leak milk from one breast as your baby feeds from the other, tuck a small, clean, BPA-free container under the nipple of your second breast while your baby is nursing. Safely store the milk to use later.

Using Expressed Milk

When you give your baby expressed milk, you can use:

- a glass
- a cup, like a small medicine measure cup
- a spoon
- a bottle made of glass or BPA-free hard plastic

Thoroughly wash all bottles, containers and pump parts after every use (see [Cleaning and Sterilizing Feeding Equipment](#)). Use the milk with the earliest date on the label first. When a feeding is done, throw away any leftover milk.

Frozen milk

It's best to thaw frozen milk in the fridge. But if you need the milk right away, run the container or bag under warm tap water or put it in a clean bowl or mug of warm water. Don't let the water touch the lid of the container or the top of the bag. Once thawed, gently swirl the milk. Thaw only what you need for one feeding.

Milk stored in the fridge

You can give your baby expressed milk right from the fridge. But if you want to warm it, run the container or bag under warm tap water or put it in a bowl of warm water. Don't let the water touch the lid of the container, the top of the bag or the nipple of the bottle.



BE AWARE

Don't use the stove or microwave to heat human milk. It can heat unevenly and burn your baby. If you use a commercial milk warmer, follow the manufacturer's directions carefully.