

# Colostrum Harvesting



Western Health  
and Social Care Trust

Expressing your  
milk before  
baby is  
born

Adapted from  
the Association of  
Breastfeeding Mothers  
(ABM) Information Leaflet.



# What is Colostrum Harvesting?

**This means that a mother-to-be starts to collect and store her 1<sup>st</sup> milk (colostrum) before her baby is born.**

You can express your colostrum from around 37 Weeks. Some mothers with a multiple pregnancy may sometimes be advised to start expressing sooner as giving birth earlier is more likely. Please speak to your consultant or midwife before starting hand expressing before 37 weeks.

The aim of antenatal expressing is to have a supply of colostrum available in case things don't go to plan in the first few days. Many families find this reassuring.

Colostrum contains vital immunological properties which colonises the baby's gut with healthy bacteria and can help protect against disease and allergy. It also contains the perfect balance of proteins, fats and micronutrients needed for human babies as well as acting as a laxative to aid the passing of the first 'tarry' meconium stools (poos).

**! You can talk to your midwife about expressing colostrum.**

# What is Colostrum Harvesting?

It may not be recommended if you have a history of threatened or have had a previous preterm labour, if you have a history of cervical incompetence or if you have had a suture put in your cervix to prevent preterm labour.

**NOTE:** The oxytocin hormone released during expressing may stimulate the uterus. If you experience any cramping in your uterus (contraction), you should STOP immediately and discuss your options with your healthcare provider.

**It is preferable to express colostrum by hand** rather than use an electric or manual breast pump. This is because colostrum will be produced in quite small quantities and can easily stick to the bottles or pump parts and be harder to collect. If you hand express and use a syringe/sterile container to draw up the individual drips of colostrum, you can then use these syringes for safe storage prior to birth.



It may be useful to look online for videos of hand expression techniques. We recommend the UNICEF Baby Friendly Initiative site.

<https://www.unicef.org.uk/babyfriendly/baby-friendly-resources/video/hand-expression/>

# Why do we Suggest Colostrum Harvesting?

**Some babies may experience difficulties with feeding or maintaining their blood sugar levels during the first few days after birth and therefore may require supplementary feeds. These include:**

- babies whose mother has diabetes in pregnancy (Gestational Diabetes) or who has a history of diabetes Type 1 or 2
- Mothers who have had breastfeeding difficulties in the past or have had breast surgery
- babies with a cleft lip or palate identified during pregnancy
- babies with congenital conditions such as Down's syndrome or cardiac complications
- babies diagnosed with intrauterine growth restriction particularly if the mother has had Betnasol
- babies whose mother is taking beta blockers to control high blood pressure
- twins or triplets
- babies who have a family history of cow's milk protein sensitivity. These families may be particularly keen to avoid the use of early formula supplementation
- Increases later milk production.

# How do I Express by Hand?



- 1.** Start off by encouraging your milk to flow. To express by hand, start by gently massaging your breast and nipple to stimulate the hormones needed to release milk.



- 2.** Position your thumb and fingers in a 'C' shape, 2 to 3 cm back from the base of your nipple.



- 3.** Gently press and release, and keep repeating until your milk starts to flow. This may take a few minutes.



# How do I Express by Hand?



Applying a warm compress to your breast or expressing after a warm bath or shower can help the flow of colostrum.

4. Collect the colostrum into a sterile container or syringe. 'However for mothers' that want to donate their breast milk to the Milk Bank, collect the colostrum into a sterile container (the hospital or milk bank can supply these).
5. Rotate the position of your fingers and thumb around the areola (imagine a clock face, and move from 12 and 6 o'clock to 3 and 9 o'clock) and repeat the expressing process to stimulate and remove colostrum from different parts of your breast.
6. Move from breast to breast until you have spent approx 10 mins each side.
7. Try to do this twice a day and store the milk as guided.



It is normal for colostrum to vary in appearance. Sometimes it may appear quite thick and yellow or orange and at other times paler and thinner.

# Storing Your Colostrum

- 'Colostrum can be collected into clean/sterile container depending on where the colostrum is destined for baby or milk bank. Each individual expression requires cooling the milk to 4 degrees or less prior to layering expressed donor milk into the same container.
- At the end of the collecting day, the colostrum can be frozen - place the syringe, into a zip-lock bag before putting into the freezer. Label the syringe and bag (separately) detailing your name, hospital number and the date of when you expressed.
- Frozen colostrum can be stored for up to six months in the freezer. Once thawed, it should be used within 24 hours. Keep colostrum frozen until needed. Frozen colostrum can be transported to hospital in the sterile syringes /containers in an insulated bag containing an ice pack block. If required the colostrum can be defrosted by letting sit at room temperature until defrosted.
- It is a good idea to mention your colostrum stores on your birth plan and make sure the hospital staff are aware in advance of your wishes.
- When your baby is born skin to skin contact is ideal so your baby can use their instinctive behaviour and search for the breast. If your baby is experiencing difficulties with breastfeeding at this time it can be helpful to express some fresh colostrum to give to your baby. You could also use the colostrum you have brought into hospital with you.
- Any stored milk can be defrosted and given in addition to supporting breastfeeding in the early days. However, once defrosted, it should be used within 24 hours.

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