



One of the things that parents can do to prepare for breastfeeding is practice the technique of hand-expression and perhaps even save some small amounts of colostrum which can be given to baby in the early days, if it is needed.

What is colostrum?

Perhaps you have begun to leak small amounts of “colostrum” during pregnancy or maybe not. Colostrum is the “early milk” that a pregnant body begins to produce around the twentieth week and up until the first three or four days after a baby is born. It can be dark yellow or clear or any colour in between. It varies in consistency but is often quite thick and somewhat sticky. Colostrum is produced in very small amounts (between 5-15mls/feeding) but is nutritionally dense, full of antibodies that help to protect your baby from disease, and helps baby to pass the meconium (baby’s first poop) which in turn, helps to prevent jaundice. This makes it the perfect food for babies’ tiny tummies in the early days. This early milk slowly transitions to more mature milk, which is produced in much greater volumes, when the “milk comes in” between days 3-5.



Reasons to give baby prenatally-expressed colostrum

- Babies who are experiencing low blood sugar could be given colostrum that was expressed prenatally instead of formula. This could be particularly helpful for those with gestational or chronic diabetes because their babies often experience low blood sugar after birth.
- If there is a delay in the mature milk “coming in”, the baby could be given this saved, expressed colostrum in addition to the colostrum that the mother produces after the baby is born. This can be helpful for mothers with diabetes, those who have had breast reduction surgery, are recovering from a difficult birth or have other medical conditions.
- If the baby is a bit sleepy in the early days after birth and is having trouble breastfeeding effectively, the baby could also develop low blood sugar. Having expressed colostrum available, in addition to the colostrum that the mother produces after the baby is born, can help parents avoid supplementation with formula.
- If the baby has a cleft lip or palate, or some other condition that makes breastfeeding difficult, having stored colostrum can be helpful.
- This can also be helpful if you and your baby need to be separated for any reason.



Something to keep in mind

Hand-expression takes some practice so there is no need to be concerned if you don't get any drops at all. That's okay. Whether or not you are able to remove any colostrum in pregnancy does not reflect how much milk you will make once your baby arrives. It is still helpful to get to know your breasts and practice hand-expression.

Getting ready

- Most women with low-risk pregnancies can begin hand-expression at 37 weeks, unless advised not to by their doctors or midwives.
- Begin by watching this excellent video produced by Stanford University which explains how to hand-express.

Gathering your supplies

You will need:

- A clean cup to express the colostrum into;
- Several small 3-5mL syringes (which you can purchase at a pharmacy or medical supply store) or clean storage containers, like small canning jars with lids;
- A clean plastic freezer bag for storing the syringes.

Getting Started

- Wash your hands.
- Find somewhere comfortable to sit and begin by very gently massaging your breasts for around 30 seconds or so.
- Begin by lifting your breast slightly and placing your fingers and thumb in a "C" shape about 5cm (2 inches) away from your nipple.
- Gently press your fingers and thumb back towards your chest wall, like you wanted to touch your ribs.
- Then gently compress your fingers and thumb together being careful to not slide your fingers toward the nipple or pull on the skin. A small piece of medical tape placed on your breasts can help remind you where your fingers should be.
- Relax your fingers.
- Check that your fingers are still in the starting "C" position and then repeat the process: Press (back to the chest wall), Compress (bringing fingers gently together), Relax.
- You can try moving the tape markers around the breast, so you are expressing from different parts of the breast, maintaining the "C" position.
- Don't expect to see any drops at all for several seconds.
- When the colostrum starts to flow, begin collecting it into the clean cup or directly into the syringe, if the opening is large enough.
- Begin with 3 to 5 minutes of expression on each breast, two to three times per day, expressing from each breast at least twice but you can go back and forth between breasts many times throughout the 3 to 5 minutes. If you feel any cramping or contractions stop immediately.



Storing the colostrum

- Any colostrum collected during the same day can be stored in the same syringe, up to a maximum of 5mls or so. Most babies in the early days only eat 5-15mls at a feeding and you don't want to have to throw out colostrum that baby doesn't eat, so it is helpful to store it in 5ml portions. Place the syringe in the refrigerator between expression sessions. At the end of the day, place the syringe in a clean plastic freezer bag and place it in the freezer.
- If you don't have any syringes on hand the colostrum can be stored in a clean, sealed container in the freezer, like a small canning jar with a lid. The milk can be thawed and fed to your baby with a tiny spoon, syringe or medi-cup when the time comes.
- Be sure to label the syringes or containers with the date, time of the first expression, and your initials. The colostrum can be stored in the freezer for 4 to 6 months.

Taking your colostrum with you

- When it comes time for your baby to be born, you can take the colostrum with you to the hospital (or birthing place), in a cooler surrounded by ice packs to keep it cold.
- Only take two or three syringes with you. You can always ask someone to bring you more if you need them but you don't want them to thaw if they are not needed. Any thawed syringes need to be used within 24 hours and you don't want your hard work to go to waste. The jars or syringes can be thawed quite quickly by placing them in lukewarm water.

Having some of your own colostrum to feed your baby in the early days or even just beginning to practice hand-expression in pregnancy can help you to feel prepared to get breastfeeding off to a good start.

