Breast Care and Expressing Milk

There are times when you will need to remove (express) milk from your breasts to save for later use. When you need to be away for a few hours or if your baby cannot breastfeed while he or she is in the hospital, you can express milk from your breasts. This prevents swollen breasts (breast engorgement) and ensures you can keep making milk.

Caring for your breasts will help to keep you comfortable and will help to make sure there is milk for your baby.

How the breasts make milk

The breasts are made up of milk-producing glands, tubes (ducts), and fatty tissue. The glands produce the milk. When a baby sucks, the milk flows through ducts to the nipple openings.

How to care for your breasts

- Wash your breasts with clear, warm water daily when you shower. Wear loose-fitting clothing to prevent cutting off the circulation to your breasts. This could cause your ducts to become clogged.

- You may want to wear a well-fitting nursing bra to give support. A nursing bra lets you uncover your breasts without taking off the bra.

- You may want to keep nursing pads (washable or disposable) or clean, folded cloths inside your bra. These will soak up drops of milk that may leak between feedings or expressions. Change the pads when they get wet.

- You do not need to wash your breasts before or after breastfeeding or expressing milk. You can let breast milk dry on your breasts after feedings.

Picture 1 Breastfeeding your baby can be a special time for both of you.
When and how to express the milk

Express the milk as often as your baby would breastfeed (at least 8 times a day or every 2 to 3 hours). This would include any feedings that would happen during the night.

Milk can be expressed with your hands (hand expression) or by pump. Depending on whether you are using an electric or battery powered pump or a hand-operated breast pump, the amount of time needed to pump can vary. Usually 15 to 20 minutes per breast is enough. Many electric pumps are able to pump both breasts at once. A hospital grade electric breast pump is recommended if your baby is in the hospital. *(See Helping Hand HH-IV-85, Breast Milk for your Hospitalized Infant: Electric Breast Pump.)*

It takes time and practice to learn to express milk by any method. Do not be discouraged if you have trouble at first. It is easier to express milk when you are relaxed.

Hand (manual) expression

1. Wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water for 15 seconds.
2. Start with a breast massage (Picture 2).
3. Place your thumb on top and your forefinger under the nipple (Picture 3).
4. Gently push your finger and thumb back toward your chest (Picture 4).
5. Squeeze gently in a “milking” motion to remove the milk (Picture 5).
6. Repeat the procedure, changing the position of your grasp on the breast so all areas of the breast are thoroughly drained. Repeat on the other breast.

7. Express the milk into a container:
   - For well babies, express the milk into a clean container. Some women prefer to use a cup or bowl.
   - If your baby is in the hospital, put the expressed milk into sterile containers that are provided. Hand expression for babies in the hospital should be combined with milk expression with a hospital grade electric breast pump.

Safe storage and use of expressed milk

1. Use only one container for each time that you express milk. Do not add newly expressed milk to a container that already has stored milk.

2. Write important information on the label of the bottle:
   - For well babies at home, label the milk container with the date and time of the collection.
   - For hospitalized babies, be sure to write your baby’s name, medical record number, and the date and time of the milk collection. Also note any medicines you have taken in the past 24 hours.

3. Refrigerate or freeze the expressed breast milk based on your baby’s feeding plan and if your baby is in the hospital. Follow these guidelines to know how long your breastmilk can be stored and when it needs to be thrown away.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Storage Guidelines for Breast Milk</th>
<th>Hospital</th>
<th>Home</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expressed Breast Milk, Fresh, room temperature (25° C, 77° F)</td>
<td>4 hours</td>
<td>6-8 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressed Breast Milk, Fresh, refrigerated (4° C, 40° F)</td>
<td>48 hours</td>
<td>5 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressed Breast Milk, Freezer compartment of the refrigerator</td>
<td>3 months</td>
<td>3-6 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressed Breast Milk, Frozen – deep freezer (-20° C, -4° F)</td>
<td>12 months</td>
<td>12 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressed Breast Milk Thawed</td>
<td>24 Hours</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. If you need to bring breast milk to the hospital, pack the milk with freezer packs in a cooler. Do not pack your milk with ice. When you arrive, give your breast milk to a staff member and ask them to immediately store in the freezer unless needed immediately.

If your baby is in the hospital, bring only frozen or freshly expressed refrigerated milk to the hospital. Do not thaw frozen milk before coming.

5. For home, frozen milk can be thawed in three different ways. Thawing time will vary based one of the methods below:

- Use a commercial bottle warmer. Follow the manufacturer’s instructions.
- Place frozen bottle in a plastic bag and place in warm tap water. Do not use boiling water.
- Place frozen bottle in cold water in a refrigerator to thaw overnight.

Milk should not be refrozen once thawed. Thawed milk should be thrown away after 24 hours.

6. Milk in stored containers can be combined right before feeding the baby if it is all at the same temperature.

7. Throw away any leftover milk in the bottle after feeding.

8. **Do not microwave breast milk!** This can destroy the parts of the milk that protect your baby from illness and it could burn your baby’s mouth!

**Breast engorgement**

Breast engorgement sometimes occurs when milk builds up in the breasts. It usually lasts only a day or two. Here are some things you can do:

- Gently massage the breast to help the milk flow.
- Express milk by hand or with a pump between feedings.
- Stand in a warm shower or place warm, moist compresses on the breasts to provide some relief.
- Put ice packs to the sides of your breasts for no more than 20 minutes after pumping or breastfeeding.
- Loosen your bra if it is too tight.
When to call the doctor

Call your doctor if:

- Your breasts stay swollen or painfully engorged after expressing milk several times.
- Your breasts feel hot when you touch them.
- Your breast is reddened.
- Your nipples are sore, cracked or bleeding.
- You develop a fever higher than 101°F.

If you have any questions, please call the Nationwide Children's Hospital lactation consultant at (614)722-5228.