

Antenatal expressing: expressing breastmilk during pregnancy



the women's
the royal women's hospital

Breastfeeding is highly recommended for your health and your baby's health. You may have considered expressing breastmilk while you are pregnant. This is called antenatal expressing.

Why express breastmilk before your baby is born?

The first milk - which may be cream, yellow, or clear in colour - is called colostrum and provides all the fluid and nutrition a healthy baby needs.

Expressing breastmilk after 36 weeks of pregnancy may be a way to store breastmilk to use if needed, when your baby is born.

Should you express breastmilk before birth?

If you have diabetes during your pregnancy, you may be asked to try expressing in pregnancy. This is because your baby may have low blood sugar levels soon after birth. Even small amounts of breastmilk have been shown to support babies born with low sugar levels. If you have diabetes in pregnancy, it is important to talk with your midwife and doctor to see if expressing breastmilk during pregnancy is right for you.

If you don't have diabetes in pregnancy, or have other health or feeding concerns, you may be thinking about antenatal expressing. Currently, we don't routinely advise expressing during pregnancy, as we don't believe it is necessary for all.

We do know it is important to learn about breastfeeding before your baby is born. It is useful to understand:

- how often your baby may feed
- if your baby is getting enough breastmilk
- how skin-to-skin contact helps breastfeeding
- where to get help with breastfeeding.

This can help you feel more confident and relaxed about caring for your baby. Talk to your midwife about breastfeeding and see the links below for more information.

If you are planning to express breastmilk during pregnancy

If you have been advised to or are considering expressing breastmilk during pregnancy and you have spoken with your midwife or doctor, here are some important points to know.

When would I start expressing?

No earlier than 36 weeks of pregnancy.

How often do I express and for how long?

Express twice a day, for example once in the morning, once in the evening and for about 10 minutes in total each time - about 5 minutes from each breast.

How much breastmilk will I get?

About 1 in 4 women will get no breastmilk at all when they try expressing and this is normal for some so, please don't be concerned.

If you can express breastmilk, the amount is often quite small, on average about 5mls in total (not for each express).

How do I collect and store the breastmilk?

- You will need syringes and stoppers to seal the syringes and if you are getting more milk, small plastic containers with close sealing lids.

- Make sure any containers are thoroughly washed with hot soapy water, rinsed with hot water, and left to air dry in a clean place before using.
- You can use the same syringe/container to collect all your milk for 24 hours, and a second one if needed. Store your morning expressed milk in the refrigerator and top it up with the milk you express at night.
- Write the date, time, your name, and hospital number on a label and place on the syringe or container each time you express.
- If you collect smaller amounts of milk, you may find it easier to use a clean teaspoon. Wash the teaspoon with hot soapy water, rinse and use the syringe to draw up the milk from the spoon.
- Use the stopper to seal the syringe before refrigerating or freezing.
- Place any syringes or containers into the freezer each evening.
- Use a new syringe or container each morning.

How do I hand express?

Wash your hands with warm water and soap before expressing. Expressing after a warm bath or shower and gentle breast stroking may help with milk flow. You may prefer to ask your midwife or follow the instructions below to learn how to express.

- Place the pads of your thumb and forefinger opposite each other on the outer edge of your areola and then gently press them back into your breast tissue and squeeze together rhythmically. This should not be painful.
- Sometimes moving your fingers around your areola to express (like moving around the face of a clock) can be helpful.
- Express until the flow stops (up to 5 minutes, but not more) then change to the other breast.
- Swap hands or have a rest as needed.

Remember – do not worry if there is little or no breastmilk. Contact your midwife if you feel uncertain about expressing or it is causing any discomfort.

What should I look out for?

Hand expressing while you are pregnant may cause an increase of the hormone oxytocin in your blood. This may cause some tightenings (mild contractions) in your uterus. It is unlikely that expressing will cause any problems, however before you express it is important that:

- You are not experiencing any abdominal or labour pains, and
- Your baby is moving normally.

If you are not sure that your baby is moving normally, you should not express and you should contact the hospital. We give this advice to anyone who is pregnant.

If you notice any of the following things during or after expressing:

- a prolonged tightening (lasting more than 1 minute)
- very frequent tightenings (more than 5 in 10 minutes)
- any bleeding
- a reduction in the baby's movements.

You should stop expressing and contact your hospital.

What happens when I come into hospital to have my baby?

Bring your frozen breastmilk packed with a frozen cold pack, with you when you come into hospital to have your baby.

Give your milk to the midwife as soon as possible after you arrive at the hospital so it can be stored in the freezer in postnatal ward.

When your baby is born

We will help you to breastfeed your baby as soon as possible after your birth. Remember, skin-to-skin contact and breastfeeding your as soon after your birth is a great start for breastfeeding. If you had diabetes during pregnancy, the nurses/midwives will test your baby's blood sugar levels and guide you with your feeding.

Having your baby in skin-to-skin contact helps keep your baby warm and get them ready to breastfeed. Breastfeed often, - that is every time your baby shows interest in feeding (usually at least 8 to 12 times in 24 hrs).

For more information and advice

Your local Maternal and Child Health Nurse

Victorian Maternal and Child Health Line

T: 13 22 29 (24 hours, 7 days)

Australian Breastfeeding Association

T: 1800 686 268 - Breastfeeding Helpline (24hours, 7 days)

W: breastfeeding.asn.au

Related fact sheets on the Women's website

- You're pregnant, so let's talk about feeding your baby
- Expressing breast milk

Related Clinical Guidelines

- Antenatal Expressing of Breastmilk

Family Violence Support

1800 Respect National Helpline

Support for people impacted by sexual assault, domestic or family violence and abuse.

T: 1800 737 732 (24-hour support service)

W: 1800respect.org.au

Do you need an interpreter?



If you need an interpreter, remember you can ask for one.

Disclaimer: This fact sheet provides general information only. For specific advice about your or your baby's healthcare needs, you should seek advice from your health professional. The Royal Women's Hospital does not accept any responsibility for loss or damage arising from your reliance on this fact sheet instead of seeing a health professional. If you or your baby require urgent medical attention, please contact your nearest emergency department.
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