

# The benefits of breast milk for premature and sick babies requiring care on NICU.

**You may not have decided yet how to feed your baby long term, but if your baby is born prematurely or unwell, you will be encouraged to express milk for them very soon after birth.**

Whilst this can be overwhelming and a lot for you to process, the midwives, nurses and infant feeding team will be on hand to talk to you and help you with expressing, storing and delivering your breast milk to your baby. This leaflet is designed to share some of the science behind the benefits of breast milk for preterm babies.

**Evidence suggests that for premature babies, your fresh breast milk is the most important and effective nutrition that is available.**

Your fresh breast milk has a vital role in protecting your baby's gut from necrotising enterocolitis, a very serious gut condition. It also helps their brain to grow, builds their immune system and enables their eyes and lungs to develop. For premature babies, breast milk is linked with improved development as the baby grows up. This includes skills like walking, coordination & speech.



**Each ml  
of breast milk  
has a positive  
influence on  
outcomes for  
premature babies.**

**All babies,  
no matter how  
early  
or unwell, can  
receive  
colostrum  
(special early  
milk) into their  
mouths.**

**Breast milk  
is specifically  
designed for your  
baby in terms of  
nutrition, optimum  
gut health and  
immunity.**

## When can I start expressing breast milk for my baby?

Although you may give birth early, your body will still be able to make breast milk but your breasts will need the stimulation of regular expressing to start and maintain breast milk production.

Every  
Drop  
Counts

## Expressing before your baby is born

You can start expressing breast milk for your baby even before they are born. You must discuss this with your doctor or midwife before you start as **antenatal expressing should only be done once it is certain that you will give birth to your baby in the next few hours.**

You can discuss this with the obstetric and midwifery team to support your decision.

- Antenatal expressing can be done by hand or by using the initiate setting on the hospital grade double pump. Expressing by hand or pump encourages your breasts to have milk available at birth. This would mean your breast milk can be one of the first (and most important) treatments your baby receives.

## Expressing after your baby is born

- Evidence shows that if you can **express within the first 1 – 2 hours after giving birth**, your milk volumes will be over double by 7 days (compared to first expression after 2 hours of giving birth), and this difference continues until at least 4 weeks. Start as soon as you feel able.

## Frequency of expressing:

- Aim to express **8 to 10 times in 24 hours including overnight with no long gaps**. Staff can help you with both hand expressing and using the pump.
- **Night time expressing** is important because that is when the hormone receptors are most ready to stimulate milk production. Although challenging it will help with establishing your supply.
- It may seem frustrating when very little milk comes out initially, but this is normal and it is the stimulation that is important to get breast milk production established. **Every drop of breast milk counts and gives your baby important nutrients.**



### **Increasing Milk Supply:**

Sometimes, despite regular expressing, your milk supply may start to fall. Feel free to talk to us about this but there are also things we recommended you do to help increase your breast milk supply:

- Increase the amount of contact and skin to skin or still touch you have with your baby (staff will support you with this).
- Express near your baby, think about your baby and look at photos of your baby while you express.
- Exchange a snuggle triangle or item of clothing with your baby that has been near you. They will be comforted by your smell and you can touch and smell something that your baby has been close to when you are expressing.
- Look after yourself by staying hydrated, eating well and getting rest when you can.
- Increase the frequency of expressing attempts; try hand expressing and using the pump.
- Check you have a good fit with the pump. There are different size shields available and we can help you check you have the right one.

### **Donor Human Milk**

Your fresh milk is the most important and effective nutrition available. Where possible, we avoid giving formula for premature or very low birth weight infants as it can increase the risk of a serious gut complication; Necrotising Enterocolitis (NEC). NEC is an acute inflammatory disease of the intestines and the most common gastrointestinal medical emergency occurring in preterm babies.

We will do everything we can to support you to produce your own milk to give to your baby but, when necessary, for example while your milk volume is increasing, we may offer Donor Human Milk for all babies <32 weeks gestation or under 1.5kg. Donor Human Milk is a highly regulated pasteurised product obtained from The Hearts Milk Bank or The Rosie Hospital, Cambridge.

Please see our leaflet titled: Use of Donor Human Milk on the Neonatal Unit (NICU)

### **Next steps:**

Please see the next page for instructions on how to hand express. There are numbered stickers attached for you to label your milk in order of expression. This means we can give your milk to your baby as soon as it is available in the order that it was expressed.

We have a further resource available titled: Infant Feeding on the Neonatal Unit from admission to discharge and beyond. If applicable we will provide you with this once you and your family are settled into your admission on the unit. If you require any further support with early expressing, please ask your cot side nurse who will be able to contact the neonatal infant feeding team.



## How to hand express:

### Step 1

Start off by encouraging your milk to flow – thinking about your baby or being near your baby (if able) will help. To express by hand, start by gently massaging your breast and nipple to stimulate the hormones needed to release milk.



### Step 2

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



### Step 3

Gently press and release, press and release, and keep repeating until your milk starts to flow. This may take a few minutes or it can take a few attempts before you see any milk, this is normal. Collect any milk in a colostrum syringe or sterile pot.



### Step 4

When the flow slows down, move your fingers round to a different part of your breast and start again. Change breasts and repeat. Label any milk with a 'numbered sticker,' your full name and the date and time. Hand to your nurse or midwife who will take your milk to NICU.



Follow the QR code for a hand expressing  
video by UNICEF.