

Maternity Services

Expressing your Breastmilk in the Antenatal Period

What is Antenatal Hand Expressing?

Antenatal hand expressing is the process of gently expressing milk out of your breasts in the final few weeks of pregnancy. You can start producing breastmilk (called colostrum) from around 16-20 weeks gestation. Colostrum contains the exact amount of nutrients that your baby needs, including precious antibodies and essential healthy bacteria that protect babies from infections, allergies, and disease.

Why should I consider expressing my colostrum in late pregnancy?

Our maternity staff will assist you and your baby to master the skill of breastfeeding, however some babies may find it harder to feed or have low blood glucose in the first few hours of life, and so need a little extra breastmilk. If you express colostrum antenatally, you can feed your baby with this instead of giving artificial milk (formula). Artificial milk is ideally avoided, especially where there is a family history of diabetes or cow's milk protein allergy.

A baby is more likely to need a little extra milk in the form of expressed colostrum if:

- You have pre-existing or gestational diabetes.
- Your baby has been diagnosed with intrauterine growth restriction
- You are having twins or triplets
- You are being medicated for high blood pressure
- Your pregnancy is considered high risk for any other reason
- Your baby is born before 37 weeks gestation

Who can express breastmilk antenatally?

All women from 36 weeks of pregnancy can express their breastmilk. Your midwife will discuss this with you and supply sterile syringes to collect your colostrum.

How do I express my breast milk?

- Clean your hands and have a sterilised container or syringe ready.
- Be comfortable and relaxed. Some women find a bath, shower or warm compress useful before expressing to aid the flow of their breast milk.
- Massage your breasts gently prior to hand expressing, stroking from the back of your breast towards the nipple to encourage the milk ejection reflex.
- Cup your breast with your hand creating a 'C' shape, with your thumb and index finger placed about 2-3cm away from the nipple. Some women may feel a change in texture in the breast tissue – it can feel 'knobbly' and firmer.
- Using your thumb and index finger, press back towards your chest, then compress (press your fingers together) and release. It shouldn't hurt.



- Release the pressure, then repeat again and again, rhythmically. Avoid sliding your fingers over the skin.
- Colostrum may start to show as a bead or droplet. Colostrum is thick and may be yellow, clear, white, red or green. If the colostrum does not flow, try moving your fingers slightly toward the nipple or slightly further away to find the spot that works best for you. It may take a few days of practice before drops appear.
- When the colostrum is coming drop by drop, collect it in your sterile container.
- When the flow slows down, rotate your fingers around the breast (like moving around the numbers on a clock face) and start the process again
- Keep going until you have worked all the way around the breast, then repeat on your other breast

A good demonstration video is here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WlRhDf-2d8w>



How often should I hand express and how much is normal?

We would suggest expressing 2-3 times per day for up to about 5 minutes on each breast each session. Colostrum is very small in quantity but it is extremely concentrated in excellent properties. Some women may achieve a few drops, others a teaspoon and some none. Please be reassured that this is no indication of your milk supply once baby is here.

How do I store the expressed colostrum?

You will need to store the colostrum in sterile syringes, capped off with sterile caps. You can get these from your community midwife or staff at the antenatal clinic.

Colostrum can be collected two to three times each day in the same syringe. You will need to store the syringe in the fridge between uses. Remember to label your container with your name, hospital number (found on your hospital notes) and the date that you expressed it. You can then store it in a zip-lock bag and put it in your freezer at the end of the collecting day.

How do I bring my expressed colostrum to the hospital safely?

When you go to the hospital to give birth, place your expressed colostrum in a zip-lock bag and transport it in a cool bag with ice packs. Notify staff on arrival so that it can be signed into our freezer. Once thawed it cannot be refrozen and it should be used within 24 hours.

NOTE – You may find that hand expressing stimulates Braxton Hicks contractions (hardening of the uterus). Please do not worry about these unless they begin to feel like labour pain, in which case please call: Delivery Suite 01603 287329 (24 hours).