



**University Hospitals  
Bristol and Weston**  
NHS Foundation Trust

Patient information service  
**St Michael's Hospital**  
**Weston General Hospital**

# Expressing colostrum in pregnancy





## What is colostrum?

Your breasts start to produce the first type of breast milk, called colostrum, as early as 12 weeks in pregnancy. If you've been pregnant before and you are continuing to breastfeed an older child, you or your child may notice that your milk changes back to colostrum around 12 weeks of pregnancy onwards.

If you're over 12 weeks pregnant you may have noticed drops of milk leaking from your nipples, when you squeeze them, or on to your clothes. If you haven't yet, then you might do soon. Not everybody leaks milk though, and it doesn't mean it isn't there. Be certain that your breasts will be preparing nicely for your baby's arrival along with the rest of your body!

Colostrum will be very important for your new baby when he or she arrives. It is rich in antibodies and all the food your baby needs in the first few days to help with the big transition in to the outside world.

## Can I really express colostrum in my pregnancy?

Yes, any mother can express her colostrum in pregnancy. It is recommended that this is done by hand rather than pump because colostrum is small in quantity and can get lost in a pump.

Hand expressing can be a great way to prepare you for your breastfeeding journey. Hand expressing simply means gently massaging or squeezing milk out of your breast. By getting familiar with the technique you are likely to feel more confident when the time comes, and better prepared to meet any feeding challenges should they arise.

You can also even collect and store any colostrum that you express, and give that to your baby when they are born, in addition to normal feeds.

## **I'm not sure if I want to breastfeed, or if I'll be able to...**

That's fine! You don't need to decide now. Hand expressing in pregnancy is still recommended, and might help you to think about your options and how you might feel once your baby arrives. Even if you don't go on to breastfeed, giving your baby colostrum is hugely valuable.

It is known that not exclusively breastfeeding has negative health implications for mums and babies. Hand expressing in pregnancy supports your existing ability to breastfeed exclusively, as recommended, if you choose to. It's not compulsory at all. Staff will support you to find the method of feeding that works best for you and your baby.



## **Are there any special circumstances I should know about?**

If you have a pregnancy where you've been told that it is much more likely you will have dangerous bleeding, or go in to labour very early, then talk to your midwife or doctor about hand expressing before starting.

## **Are there times when it might be especially helpful?**

Hand expressing in pregnancy, and potentially storing colostrum to give to the baby after birth, is particularly useful if your baby is more likely to need extra milk as well as, or instead of, usual feeds.

This might be because your baby is more likely than most to have low blood sugar (hypoglycaemia) after birth.

### **Perhaps because:**

- you have diabetes or have developed diabetes in pregnancy (gestational diabetes)
- you are taking beta-blockers in pregnancy to control blood pressure (for example labetalol)
- it is expected that your baby will be particularly small ('growth restricted') when born
- you are having twins or triplets, who may be born a little smaller than singleton
- it is expected that your baby will be born before 37 week.

### **It can also be because:**

- you're expecting breastfeeding to be particularly challenging or impossible, for example because your baby is thought to have a cleft palate, or you've had surgery
- you're expecting to be separated from your baby after birth, because one or both of you will need special medical care
- it really is something that many mums and babies can benefit from though, so whether things are slightly complicated or not, if you think you'd like to, give it a go and see how you get on.

**It's not essential, just useful. Relax and give it a try.**

## Why is it so important for diabetic mothers?

Research shows that babies who are breastfed are less likely to develop childhood diabetes. It is thought that cows milk (the main ingredient of formula milk) can trigger diabetes in some babies. This is more likely if you or your partner have diabetes. Therefore, it is very important that mothers who are diabetic avoid giving their baby formula milk, if at all possible.

If you are a mother with diabetes, in the first day or so after birth, your baby may have a short time where their blood sugar is low. This may mean that your baby needs a little extra milk. To help prevent this, you'll be encouraged and supported to feed your baby frequently.

If your baby needs extra then you'll be able to hand express colostrum at the time. If you've practiced then you'll be more confident and skilled in the technique. If, as well as this, you've also got some colostrum stored from pregnancy, your baby can be given this too. Both or either of these benefits will help to avoid the need to give your baby formula milk.

If you have diabetes and are insulin-dependent, you may find that your insulin requirements are lower when you are breastfeeding, and that you need to eat more. Staff can support you with this.

If you have gestational diabetes, research has shown that you are less likely to go on to develop diabetes in later life if you breastfeed your baby.

## What if I don't get any colostrum?

That's OK! It's still beneficial. That will probably change as your pregnancy continues, and definitely when your baby arrives.

Another benefit of antenatal expressing is that it gives you an opportunity to sit down and think about your body, and your baby, and what an incredible job they're both doing as your pregnancy progresses.

Research shows that taking time to focus on, talk to and get to know your baby in pregnancy helps your babies brain development. It will also help you to build a loving bond and be more responsive to your babies needs when he or she is born. Antenatal hand expressing is a great time to do this, and can even help you feel good and relax.



## I'm having an induction of labour, is it too late?

No, now is a great time to start. Sometimes inductions can take a long time and feel really daunting. Antenatal hand expressing can give you something really positive to focus on that helps you to think about your baby and your body. It can even encourage the process along by softening your cervix.

If you manage to collect any colostrum it can be stored on the ward ready for when your baby arrives, if you choose to give it as well as normal feeds. Go for it!

# Giving it a go

## When can I start?

There's no evidence to say that it's a problem at any time in pregnancy, but most people start at around 36 weeks.

## How often should I do it?

Many women practice hand expressing between 1 and 3 times a day, but you can hand express as often as you feel comfortable to do so.

Antenatal hand expressing is not essential, just beneficial, so you could try it once or twice and see how you feel.

## How long will it take?

As long as you like. You could start with a few minutes, and build up to 20 or 30 minutes. Remember that bonding begins in pregnancy. Enjoy the opportunity to sit down and think about your baby.

You may find that when you express, you feel your womb going hard and relaxing. These are called '**Braxton Hicks**' contractions. They are more likely to occur when you carry out hand expressing as it stimulates a hormone called oxytocin.

Braxton Hicks contractions can happen during pregnancy at other times, and are nothing to worry about, unless you notice that they start to feel strong and uncomfortable, like labour contractions. If this happens, stop expressing and rest. If you are worried about them, talk to your midwife, or ring the 24 hour contact number (often central delivery suite) that has been provided to you.



## How to express your colostrum

If you are able to express any colostrum to store, you will need something sterile to collect it in. For example a pot, cup or syringe. You can ask antenatal clinic staff, your community midwife, or your local chemist to provide you with something suitable.

1. Start by getting comfortable in a warm, private and relaxing environment. Some women choose to hand express in the bath for example, but a comfy chair or bed where you feel able to focus on yourself is fine.
2. Begin by massaging your breast and nipple in whatever way feels comfortable or pleasant. This will help to trigger the hormones needed to release milk.
3. Next cup your breast with your hand, have your thumb and the rest of your fingers in a C shape, and feel back from the end of the nipple to where the texture of your breast feels different, or about 2 to 3cm back from your nipple.
4. Gently squeeze your thumb and fingers together, but do not slide them over your skin. It shouldn't hurt.
5. Release the pressure and then repeat again and again, building up a rhythm. Colostrum may start to appear straight away, or after a few minutes. Don't worry if it doesn't – with practice and more attempts, it will increase.



6. You can also try moving your thumb and fingers forwards and backwards from the nipple, to see if that works or feels better. Find the technique that works best for you.
7. Your milk ducts fan out behind your nipple, under the skin, like the petals on a flower, so it's also important to rotate your hand to stimulate all parts of your breast. Use the same technique, stay in one area until the milk stops or you feel uncomfortable, and move to another.
8. Once the colostrum flows you may notice that it is watery, or thick, and it can be white, yellow, brown, pink, or even a greeny colour. This is normal, but if you're worried about what your colostrum looks like, or how your breasts feel, speak to your midwife or doctor.
9. Collect the colostrum in the container you have prepared. Many women prefer to store their colostrum in syringes. You can express into a pot and then draw it up in to a syringe, or collect it in the syringe itself.
10. Label the syringe/container with the date and time you expressed, and your full name in case you take it in to hospital.

You may find it useful to watch a video about hand expressing that is available via the UNICEF Baby Friendly UK website (link and QR code below). The website has lots of other useful information about parenting

**<https://www.unicef.org.uk/babyfriendly/baby-friendly-resources/breastfeeding-resources/hand-expression-video/>**



## How much colostrum will I get?

Some women are not able to express more than a couple of drops of colostrum, or barely any at all – this is normal. Usually colostrum is very low in volume, and often quite sticky and concentrated (though not always).

Don't worry if you don't manage to express any colostrum, for some mothers it's not easy. Keep trying at least every day, if you're happy to, as it may take a few days before you see any colostrum.

Remember that it is not necessary to express whilst you are pregnant, but it is useful if you do. Be reassured that even if you try and don't get any colostrum to store, it is still worthwhile, and you will be able to breastfeed and/or express once your baby is born, if you choose to.

Most mothers find that they are able to express between 0.5ml and 2ml per expressing session, but it can be more or less than that amount, everyone is different. Colostrum is deliberately low in volume because a newborn babies stomach is very small and they only need concentrated, small amounts of milk when they are first born. Your body will produce exactly what is right for your baby.

There is no limit to the amount of colostrum you can express, you will not run out. It will keep being produced, on demand, until after the birth. It then continues to form part of established breast milk when your milk 'comes in' a few days later (this will happen whether you're breastfeeding or not).

## How do I store my expressed colostrum?

If you wish to store any colostrum you collect as a result of antenatal hand expressing, you have the option of keeping it in the fridge or the freezer. Don't forget it needs to go in to a clean sterile, safely sealed container, which is labelled.

You can store milk in a fridge running at 4C or lower, for up to 5 days. (If you're not sure how cold the fridge is then only store it in there for 48 hours). Milk can be stored in the freezer for 6 months. It can be moved from the fridge to the freezer.

For more detailed information on milk storage refer to the Breastfeeding information section on the Start4Life website

<https://www.nhs.uk/start4life>, or the Start4Life leaflet 'Off to the best start'.

The best way of storing your milk will depend on how soon you will have your baby. If you start expressing several weeks before your due date, store that milk in the freezer. If you are going to be induced the next day, then you can store that milk in the fridge.

If you are having your baby in hospital don't forget to bring any colostrum you have expressed and stored with you when you go in to have your baby. If your milk is frozen, transport it in a cool bag with a freezer block next to it. Let your midwife know you have it with you, and they will arrange for it to be stored in an appropriate fridge/freezer (usually on ward 76).

We hope that you will find this information useful. If you choose to try hand expressing colostrum in pregnancy, we hope it is a positive experience for you, providing reassurance and back-up if breastfeeding is tricky, or with a way of giving your baby colostrum you might not have otherwise considered.

For more information about breastfeeding you could also go along to a breastfeeding support group, who are always happy to welcome pregnant women. An up to date list of groups can be found on the Bristol City Council breastfeeding support page:

**<https://www.bristol.gov.uk/social-care-health/breastfeeding-in-bristol>**



If you have any questions please speak to your midwife.

## Notes



As well as providing clinical care, our Trust has an important role in research. This allows us to discover new and improved ways of treating patients.

While under our care, you may be invited to take part in research. To find out more please visit: [www.uhbw.nhs.uk](http://www.uhbw.nhs.uk)

Help us prevent the spread of infection in hospital. Please make sure your hands are clean. Wash and dry them thoroughly/use the gel provided. If you have been unwell in the last 48 hours please consider whether your visit is essential.

Smoking is the primary cause of preventable illness and premature death. For support in stopping smoking contact **NHS Smokefree on 0300 123 1044.**

Drinkline is the national alcohol helpline. If you're worried about your own or someone else's drinking, you can call this free helpline in complete confidence. **Drinkline on 0300 123 1110.**

To access all patient leaflets and information please go to the following address:  
<http://foi.avon.nhs.uk/>

**Bristol switchboard: 0117 923 0000**

**Weston switchboard: 01934 636 363**

**[www.uhbw.nhs.uk](http://www.uhbw.nhs.uk)**

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For an interpreter or signer please contact the telephone number on your appointment letter.



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