

Maternity

# Hand Expressing in the Postnatal Period

A guide to teach parents how to hand express their breastmilk, please take the time to read this information, and ask your midwife if you need support or have any questions.

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## Introduction

Colostrum is the first breastmilk your body produces, usually from around 16 weeks of pregnancy and will last for a few days after the birth of your baby.

Colostrum is perfectly balanced for all your baby's needs. It contains antibodies to protect your baby from infections, it lines the baby's gut to help kick start their immune system. It also helps stabilise baby's blood sugars and helps them pass their first dark poo (meconium) which can reduce the risk of jaundice.

Understanding how to hand express your breastmilk is a useful skill. It is a good way to obtain small amounts of colostrum to give to your baby. Hand expressing can help:

- if your baby isn't feeding or latching very well
- if you want to help boost your milk supply
- if your baby is separated from you on the neonatal unit
- if you experience blocked ducts or engorged breasts

## How do I hand express?

Make sure you are in a comfortable position, have clean hands and a sterile container, such as a syringe, to collect the colostrum (staff will provide this).

Keep your baby close to you as this will help stimulate oxytocin release (If your baby is on the neonatal unit, have photos/videos of you baby or a piece of their clothing close by as this will help boost your oxytocin levels).



1. Gently massage your breast for a couple of minutes. You can use the palm of your hand or the flat part of your fingers to apply gentle pressure. Move in circular motions around the breast.



2. Start at the end of your nipple and feel back about 2- 3 finger breadths, this is roughly where your milk ducts are. Position your thumb and your forefinger in a 'C' shape.



3. Gently compress your breast in a rhythmic motion (it may take a while for colostrum to appear). If you're unable to see any colostrum, move your fingers slightly forwards or backwards to find the right spot.



4. Continue this rhythmic motion until you no longer see any more drops of colostrum. Move the 'C' shape around the breast to stimulate all the milk ducts.

5. Repeat steps 1-4 on the other breast.

Please note, hand expressing your breastmilk should not be painful for you. Any force or 'pulling' of the skin can lead to breast tissue damage.

Scan this QR code to watch the UNICEF video on hand expressing. This video is a demonstration of the technique, it is not a true reflection on the amount of colostrum available to everyone.



## Labelling and safe storage

Please make sure any expressed colostrum is labelled with your name, date, and time of expression.

Milk	Place	Maximum time	
		Home	Hospital
Fresh breastmilk	Room temperature	6 hours	2-3 hours
	Fridge 5-10°C	3 days	-
	Fridge 4°C or lower	5 days*	2 days
* If the temperature of the fridge rises above 4°C after 3 days, either use within 6 hours or throw away			
Frozen breastmilk	Freezer -18°C or lower	6 months	3 months

<b>Defrosting breastmilk</b>	Defrost in the fridge	Usually takes 12 hours to defrost, then use immediately
	Defrost at room temperature	Use as soon as fully defrosted

*Adapted from the Breastfeeding Network, 2019*

## Using your colostrum

When you are ready to use your colostrum the midwife or support worker will show you how to safely give it your baby via finger feeding. Please check the label for your name and date of birth to ensure it is your milk.

**Please ensure you remove the cap from the syringe before giving your colostrum to your baby.**

As you prepare to return home, please ask a member of staff to retrieve any of your unused expressed breastmilk from the milk fridge or freezer as the hospital will no longer be able to store it for you.

## How often should I express?

It depends on the reason you are hand expressing. However, your breasts should be stimulated at least eight times in 24 hours either from your baby latching to your breast or hand expressing.

If your baby is in the neonatal unit, express at least eight times in 24 hours, including at least once overnight.

## More information

If you would like more information on feeding and caring for your baby, scan the QR code for a website with resources from the infant feeding team.



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## How do I make a comment about my visit?

We aim to provide the best possible service and staff will be happy to answer any of the questions you may have. If you have any **suggestions** or **comments** about your visit, please either speak to a member of staff or contact the patient advice and liaison service (**PALS**) on **020 3312 7777** (10.00 – 16.00, Monday to Friday). You can also email PALS at [imperial.pals@nhs.net](mailto:imperial.pals@nhs.net) The PALS team will listen to your concerns, suggestions or queries and is often able to help solve problems on your behalf.

Alternatively, you may wish to complain by contacting our complaints department:

Complaints department, fourth floor, Salton House, St Mary's Hospital, Praed Street  
London W2 1NY

Email: [ICHC-tr.Complaints@nhs.net](mailto:ICHC-tr.Complaints@nhs.net)

Telephone: **020 3312 1337 / 1349**

## Alternative formats

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[imperial.communications@nhs.net](mailto:imperial.communications@nhs.net)

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