



Antenatal colostrum harvesting

Information for pregnant women from the Infant Feeding Team

This leaflet aims to provide a useful introduction for pregnant women on how to harvest and store colostrum until baby arrives. If after reading this leaflet you still have questions, please speak to your midwife who will be able to answer your questions.

What is colostrum? Why is it good for my baby?

The first breast milk your body makes is known as colostrum and it is produced from about 16 weeks of pregnancy. It is usually a golden yellow colour and often very sticky. It is very easy for baby to digest and therefore the perfect first food for baby.

It is concentrated in nutritional properties, so baby will only need small amounts in the early days.

- Colostrum is full of antibodies to help protect your baby from infections.
- It has a laxative effect to help baby pass the early stools.
- It can reduce the effects of Jaundice in your baby.
- Giving baby colostrum is an effective way to help to regulate their blood sugar levels.



Why are you recommending that I should harvest my colostrum before my baby is born?

Harvesting colostrum before your baby is born can be beneficial if it is anticipated your baby may have challenges with breastfeeding or maintaining their blood sugar levels in their early days. This might be because your baby:

- is large or small for their gestational age
- you are expecting twins or triplets
- has a cleft lip or palate
- has a heart or other diagnosed condition.

It might be useful for you if you:

- are diabetic or have developed diabetes in pregnancy
- are taking beta-blocker medication for raised blood pressure
- plan to have a caesarean birth
- have had breast surgery
- have other reasons identified by you or your health care provider.

It is useful for all mums to learn the skill of hand expression, so that if you are unexpectedly separated from your baby, they can have access to your milk immediately.

Do I have to harvest my colostrum?

Harvesting colostrum can be useful in preparation for breastfeeding but is not essential to ensuring successful breastfeeding. It is your choice if you wish to harvest colostrum during your pregnancy.

When should I start harvesting my colostrum?

We suggest you may want to start colostrum harvesting from around 36 weeks of pregnancy. If you find you leak colostrum before this time you may wish to catch it in a 1ml syringe. You can ask your midwife for a colostrum harvesting pack or they are available from the Antenatal Clinic, the Diabetic Team, or from the Infant Feeding Team. Individual syringes are also available to buy from your local pharmacy.

You can start hand expressing once a day for a few minutes, gradually increasing up to 5 to 10 minutes, two to five times a day. It is usual to get only a drop or two to start with; this should increase over the days as you express more. A baby only needs very small amounts of colostrum during the early feeds so any amount you harvest is beneficial. Do not be alarmed if you cannot express any colostrum as this is not an indication of your milk supply. Please seek further support from your midwife if you are worried about the amount of colostrum you are able to obtain. Find a time when you can be comfortable and not rushed, as research suggests harvesting colostrum works best when you are relaxed and can take your time.

Harvesting colostrum by hand is more effective than using a pump. Only small amounts of colostrum will be produced and this could be lost when using a pump

How do I harvest the colostrum?

You will need a 1ml syringe for each time you harvest colostrum and a label.

- Wash your hands before you begin, with soap and hot water and dry.
- It may be useful to massage your breasts before you start to express or try expressing after a warm bath or shower.
- Cup your breast and place your thumb and finger about 2 to 3cm from the base of your nipple.
- Use your thumb and the rest of your fingers in a C shape and gently squeeze, pressure should be firm but not painful.
- Release the pressure and then repeat again and again. Avoid sliding your fingers over your skin as this can cause soreness and may damage your skin.
- Move your fingers around your breast and repeat the process on a different section of your breast.
- Small drops of colostrum should begin to appear, this may take practice and several attempts.
- These drops of colostrum can be caught in a small syringe or sterile lidded container.
- You may find moving your fingers slightly forward toward your nipple or further away may work better for you.



Source: NHS
Start4life 2015

A new syringe should be used each time you harvest colostrum. It is useful to label each expression with the date and time it was collected. If you are bringing the expressed colostrum in to the hospital the label should also have your full name and hospital number on it, which can be found on the label on the front of your pregnancy notes.

What if the harvesting hurts? Should I stop?

Some women find their breasts are tender during pregnancy. Harvesting colostrum should not make your breasts sore; you may find you need to change the pressure you use or the placement of your fingers for a more comfortable experience. Please speak to your midwife or visit your local breastfeeding group if you need more support.

If you experience painful contractions following antenatal colostrum harvesting that do not subside after you stop, please telephone the labour ward for advice.

- William Harvey Hospital, Delivery Suite Telephone: 01233 616124
- Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother Hospital, Delivery Suite Telephone: 01843 292494

How do I store the colostrum?

- Expressed colostrum can be kept in a refrigerator below 4°C for up to five days. The door is often the warmest part so colostrum should not be stored there.
- Colostrum can be stored for two weeks in the ice compartment of a fridge or for up to six months in a freezer.
- Defrost the frozen colostrum in the fridge and use immediately.

Should I bring my colostrum in to hospital when I give birth?

Yes, frozen expressed colostrum can be brought in to the hospital. This should be placed between ice packs and stored in a cool bag. Please let a member of staff know you have frozen colostrum when you arrive so they can place it in the freezer for you.

Are there any risks to harvesting colostrum?

Mothers should not hand express colostrum if:

- they are at risk of pre-term labour
- have a history of pre-term ruptured membranes
- they have a cervical suture in place.

Hand expressing before 36 weeks is unlikely to start labour in women who are not at risk of pre-term labour. Some women may experience some painless tightening's, often known as Braxton Hick contractions, this is normal.

Useful information

- **UNICEF** - www.unicef.org.uk/babyfriendly/baby-friendly-resources/breastfeeding-resources/hand-expression-video/ and www.unicef.org.uk/babyfriendly/baby-friendly-resources/breastfeeding-resources/off-to-the-best-start/
- **NHS Choices** - www.nhs.uk/conditions/pregnancy-and-baby/expressing-storing-breast-milk/
- **Gestational Diabetes UK** - www.gestationaldiabetes.co.uk/colostrum-harvesting/
- **Association of Breastfeeding Mothers (ABM)** - abm.me.uk/breastfeeding-information/antenatal-expression-colostrum/

What if I have any further questions or concerns?

You are welcome to attend a breastfeeding support group during your pregnancy for further information and support. Your local group can be found at www.kentcht.nhs.uk/service/kent-baby/

Please speak to your midwife if you have any questions or contact the Infant Feeding Team via email ekhuft.infantfeeding@nhs.net

This leaflet has been produced for women and their families

If you would like this information in **another language, audio, Braille, Easy Read, or large print** please ask a member of staff.

Any complaints, comments, concerns, or compliments please speak to your doctor or nurse, or contact the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) on 01227 783145 or 01227 864314, or email ekh-tr.pals@nhs.net

Further patient leaflets are available via the East Kent Hospitals web site www.ekhuft.nhs.uk/patientinformation