

Patient information factsheet

Collecting your colostrum while you are pregnant

We have written this factsheet to give you more information about collecting your colostrum (sometimes called harvesting your colostrum) while you are pregnant. It explains what colostrum is, what collecting your colostrum while you are pregnant involves, and what the advantages of it are for you and your baby. We hope it will help to answer some of the questions you may have. If you have any further questions or concerns, please speak to your midwife.

What is colostrum?

During your pregnancy, your breasts will start to produce breast milk (the exact timing of this varies from person to person). The first breast milk your body makes is known as colostrum. Colostrum is the perfect source of nutrition for your baby because it:

- contains antibodies which protect your baby from infection and help their immune system to develop
- helps your baby's digestive system to develop, which protects your baby from allergies
- encourages your baby to open their bowels and pass 'meconium' (your baby's first black sticky poo) which reduces their risk of jaundice

Colostrum is very concentrated. At birth, your baby's stomach is about the size of a marble, so they will only need a small amount of colostrum to receive all the nutrients they need.

You can collect and freeze your colostrum during the last few weeks of your pregnancy. This has many benefits for you and your baby.

What are the advantages of collecting your colostrum while you are pregnant?

Learning how to hand express your colostrum during the last few weeks of your pregnancy will enable you to:

- become familiar with your breasts and how they work
- store colostrum for your baby in case they need encouragement with feeding
- feel more confident with hand expressing your breast milk after your baby is born (for more information about this, please visit: www.uhs.nhs.uk/maternity)

Collecting your colostrum during pregnancy has benefits for all women and their babies. However, it is especially beneficial for your baby if they are likely to have difficulties with feeding or maintaining their blood sugar levels during the first few days after birth.

This may be because your baby:

- is large or small for their gestational age
- is a twin or triplet
- has a cleft lip or palate
- has Down's syndrome or a heart condition

Patient information factsheet

Collecting your colostrum can also be beneficial for your baby if you:

- are taking beta blockers to control high blood pressure
- have developed pre-eclampsia during pregnancy
- are diabetic or have developed diabetes during pregnancy
- have polycystic ovary syndrome
- have breast hypoplasia (a condition in which the breast doesn't fully develop) or you have had breast surgery
- have a raised body mass index (BMI)
- plan to give birth by caesarean section

If your baby needs extra feeds, you may be able to use your colostrum instead of formula milk.

Before you start collecting your colostrum

Your midwife will discuss collecting your colostrum with you when you are 26 to 30 weeks pregnant. However, the benefits of collecting your colostrum may not become clear until much later in your pregnancy. It is never too late to start collecting your colostrum.

You may be advised **not** to collect your colostrum if you:

- have a cervical suture (stitches) in place
- have experienced premature labour in the past
- have had contractions, vaginal bleeding and/or premature rupture of membranes (your waters breaking early) during this pregnancy

Your midwife will explain how to hand express and store your colostrum, and give you a selection of oral syringes, caps and labels. It is important to use this opportunity to ask any questions you may have.



Image of an infant feeding syringe for collecting colostrum

How to start collecting your colostrum

If you would like to collect your colostrum, you can start hand expressing for a few minutes once a day when you are 36 to 37 weeks pregnant. Gradually build up to gently expressing for about five to ten minutes at a time, two to five times a day, and then as often as necessary in the first few days after you give birth. If your baby is premature or unwell, you will be encouraged to start expressing within two to three hours of giving birth.

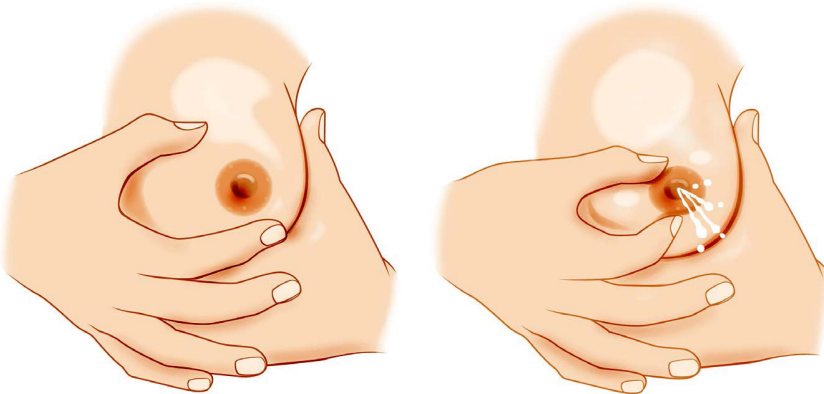
You can collect your colostrum while you're pregnant by hand expressing in the same way that you will express breast milk when your baby is born. While you're pregnant, you should only use your hands for expressing.

Do not use a breast pump until after you have given birth.

Patient information factsheet

Hand expressing your colostrum

1. To collect your colostrum, you will need a clean, sterilised syringe and a clean, sterilised larger container. Have these items ready before you start.
2. Make yourself comfortable and try to relax. Warmth will help, so try expressing in the shower or bath at first. You can gently massage your breasts with a warm flannel.
3. Use your hand to cup one of your breasts. Your hand should be in a 'C' shape around the nipple with four fingers under the breast and the thumb at the top. Your thumb and fingers should be about 2 to 3cm away from the areola (the darker area of skin around your nipple).
4. Use your thumb and index finger to gently squeeze. Release the pressure and then repeat to create a rhythm. This shouldn't hurt. Avoid sliding your fingers over your skin as this may cause discomfort. If the colostrum doesn't flow, try moving your fingers slightly towards the nipple or further away, finding the spot that works best for you. You could also try gently massaging your breast.
5. Collect your colostrum with the sterilised syringe and if necessary, decant to the larger sterilised container. Colostrum is very concentrated and will come out of your breast drop by drop. At first, only a few drops will come out at each session, but with practise and time, you should get more.
6. When the drops slow down, move your fingers round to try a different section of your breast and repeat.
7. Repeat the process for your second breast.



The amount of colostrum you collect when you express can vary from just a few drops to a teaspoon full. Every drop counts so don't lose heart if you feel you haven't collected much colostrum. This doesn't mean you won't have enough milk for your baby when they are born or that your baby will find it difficult to breastfeed.

It is very rare for colostrum collection to cause the onset of labour. You may feel your womb tightening and relaxing. This is called a Braxton Hicks contraction and isn't a cause for concern. If you begin to feel 'period-like' cramps or mild labour contractions, stop expressing, rest and then start again slowly.

Storing your colostrum

- Label the syringe or container with your name, and the date and time you expressed the colostrum.
- Put the syringe or container in a clean re-sealable bag and place it in your freezer at a temperature of -18°C .
- You can store your milk in the back of the fridge at a temperature of 2 to 4°C for up to 24

Patient information factsheet

hours before you freeze it.

You can express and freeze your colostrum at home and bring it into hospital when you have your baby. To bring your colostrum into hospital you will need:

- re-sealable food bags
- a small cool bag
- either a bag of crushed ice or two large ice blocks

When you go into hospital to have your baby, put a few of your (labelled) frozen syringes into a re-sealable food bag. Place this inside a cool bag between a bag of crushed ice or two large ice blocks. If you have lots of colostrum stored, just bring a few syringes into hospital with you. More can always be brought in later if needed.

Tell your midwife that you have colostrum with you when you arrive. It will be labelled with the date and time it was removed from your freezer, and stored in the hospital fridge or freezer (on Burley ward). This will be documented in your notes.

If you are in hospital during the later weeks of your pregnancy, discuss colostrum collection with your midwife. You will be given syringes so that you can collect your colostrum and store it in the hospital freezer.

Feeding your baby with colostrum

Some newborn babies are unable to feed well at the breast and others are unable to maintain the necessary blood sugar levels. In these situations, you can feed your baby with your colostrum.

Your midwife will take your colostrum out of the hospital fridge or freezer and check the label with you first. The syringe of colostrum will need to be brought to room temperature. You could immerse a plastic bag containing the syringe of colostrum in a bowl of warm water or place it next to your skin.

Your midwife will show you how to feed your baby with a syringe or a small cup. Having a small feed will give your baby energy and increase their blood sugar levels. It often encourages babies to breastfeed well.

Important safety information

- **Infant feeding syringes have a free-fastening lid which must be removed before giving expressed colostrum or milk to your baby.**
- **Always keep syringes and lids away from babies and children.**

Contact us

Breastfeeding Babes
Lyndhurst ward
F level
Princess Anne Hospital
Coxford Road
Southampton
SO16 5YA

Telephone: **07786 267584** (Monday to Friday, 10am to 1pm)

Patient information factsheet

Please leave your name, number and a short message via voicemail, and a member of the team will contact you. You may be offered a 'face-to-face', telephone or video consultation.

Community midwifery co-ordinator

Telephone: **07786 266529** (7.30am to 5.30pm)

Broadlands birth centre

Telephone: **023 8021 6012** (out of hours)

New Forest birth centre

Telephone: **023 8074 7690** (out of hours)

Useful links

We recommend you visit:

- the 'feeding your baby' page on our website www.uhs.nhs.uk/maternity
- www.unicef.org and download the 'Off to the best start' booklet which has been produced with the Department of Health
- www.nhs.uk/start4life/breastfeeding-more-help

Diagrams reproduced with kind permission from Public Health England:

www.unicef.org.uk/babyfriendly/baby-friendly-resources/breastfeeding-resources/off-to-the-best-start

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For help preparing for your visit, arranging an interpreter or accessing the hospital, please visit www.uhs.nhs.uk/additionalsupport