



Providing breast milk for preterm and sick babies

Why breast milk for my preterm or sick baby?

Breast milk is the best food for all babies. For preterm and sick babies in particular breast milk has many benefits. Breast milk is easier to digest and will help your baby fight infections. For preterm babies this also means less risk of some serious diseases, better long term outcomes and less admissions to hospital in the first two years of life.

At King Edward Memorial Hospital (KEMH) and Princess Margaret Hospital (PMH) we strongly recommend breast milk for all babies, especially premature babies.

Will I make milk if my baby is born early or is separated from me?

Yes, you will. Once your baby is born, even if they are born very early, you will make breast milk. You can express milk using an electric pump complemented by hand expressing. All your expressed breast milk is taken to the NICU for when your baby is ready to feed.

When do I start expressing?

After your baby is born you might be feeling anxious or worried but it is important to begin expressing milk as soon as you feel ready. You should try to do your first expression in the first hour after your baby is born. Ideally you will have expressed no later than six hours after delivery. This will help your body produce milk, even if your baby is not ready to feed.

How often do I need to express?

How much milk you produce depends on how many times you express. You should try to express seven to eight times each day, including at least once overnight.

How much milk will I get?

In the first few days, before your milk 'comes in' or starts to flow, it is normal to only express a small amount. This first milk, colostrum, is often a yellow or creamy colour. After a few days more milk will be produced and the milk will be whiter in colour. There is a big variation in the amount mothers express. Any amount of expressed breast milk is good for your baby. When your baby is two to three weeks old, you should be expressing about 500mls each day, as this is the amount your baby will need when you take your baby home. If you are having problems, please see the lactation consultant in the nursery.

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How long should I express for?

You should start with 10 -15 minutes each side. Once your milk volumes increase, you will need to express for as long as it takes to drain your breasts. You will know your breasts are drained when they feel soft, have no lumps and the flow has slowed to an occasional drip.

What do I use to express?

While you are in hospital, expressing kits and electric pumps are provided. When you go home from hospital you can borrow an expressing kit and electric pump. This needs to be returned once your baby is discharged from hospital.

How do I get started?

Ask the midwife who is caring for you to assist you, as early as possible.

Further reading

More details on expressing breast milk is available in the KEMH booklet *Expressing Breast Milk for Your Baby in the NICU*. This booklet will be given to you when your baby is admitted to the NICU at KEMH or PMH. You can also find more breastfeeding information in the booklet *Breastfeeding and Breast Care* or on the KEMH website at www.kemh.health.wa.gov.au, click on the 'Women's Health Fact Sheets' icon.



Women's health fact sheets



This document can be made available in alternative formats on request for a person with a disability.

WOMEN AND NEWBORN HEALTH SERVICE

King Edward Memorial Hospital

374 Bagot Road Subiaco Western Australia 6008

Telephone: (08) 9340 2222

Produced by: Neonatology Clinical Care Unit

Web: www.wnhs.health.wa.gov.au

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