



# Expressing breastmilk

**Expressing breastmilk is when you use your hands or a breast pump to get milk from your breasts.**

## Reasons for expressing

You might express your breastmilk because:

- your breasts are full, and expressing can make them softer so your baby can latch on more easily – this is especially helpful in the first few days
- your nipples are sore and breastfeeding is painful
- your breasts feel lumpy or you have mastitis
- you or your baby are having trouble breastfeeding and your baby needs more milk
- your milk supply is low and you want to increase it
- your baby is premature or sick, or you're unwell
- your baby can't be with you, and you need to express milk for their feeds.

## If your baby is sick or premature

Breastmilk is particularly important if your baby is sick or premature. At the hospital, we'll encourage you to express milk because it:

- is easy for your baby to digest
- helps your baby's growth and development
- protects your baby from infection.

## How often should you express milk?

Expressing milk works like breastfeeding – the more often you do it, the more milk your body makes.

How often you express depends on your situation.

- If your baby is breastfeeding, but needs more milk, you may only need to express a few times each 24 hours
- If your baby isn't breastfeeding right now:
  - start expressing as soon as possible after birth, ideally within an hour
  - hold your baby skin-to-skin just before or during expressing to help increase your milk supply
  - express frequently, at least 8 times in 24 hours, including overnight (just like a baby would breastfeed), to establish your milk supply.

The midwives and nurses caring for you and your baby will help you express milk.

## How to express milk

You can express milk by hand or with a pump.

If you need to express milk regularly, using a combination of hand expressing and a pump usually works best.

Here are some tips to help you get started:

- wash your hands before you start
- it can be helpful to hold your baby skin-to-skin before expressing
- gently stroke your breast and stimulate your nipple to help the milk flow - this is called the 'let-down reflex'
- try relaxation techniques or think about your baby while expressing - you can express your milk while sitting with your baby or have a picture of your baby with you
- be gentle when expressing to avoid hurting your breasts.

## Hand expressing

Hand expressing is a simple way to get milk from your breasts.

To express:

- place your hand under your breast
- put your thumb and pointer finger about 2 to 3 cm from your nipple, on either side of your areola (the dark area around your nipple)
- gently press your thumb and finger back into your breast, then press them towards each other behind the nipple; press for about 2 seconds, then release
- continue to press and release, and your milk should start to flow
- when the milk stops, move your fingers to another position around the edge of your areola and start again
- when it slows to just drops of milk, start expressing your other breast.

Expressing should feel firm, but **not painful**.



Scan the QR code to watch a video from the Australian Breastfeeding Association about hand expressing or visit [vimeo.com/423863333](https://vimeo.com/423863333)



## Breast pumps

Not everyone needs a breast pump, but if you do, the type of pump you choose will depend on why you're expressing milk. Many people use both a breast pump and hand expressing.

There are different types of breast pumps:

- hand pumps - are for occasional use and don't need batteries or electricity
- small electric or battery-powered pumps - work well if you have an established milk supply and need to express 2 to 3 times a day, such as for work or other reasons
- hospital type electric breast pumps - are recommended for establishing and maintaining a full milk supply, for example if your baby isn't breastfeeding or is in the Newborn Intensive Care Unit (NICU).

## How long should you spend expressing?

If you're expressing for comfort or to increase your milk supply, you may only need 5 to 10 minutes each time.

If you're expressing a full feed for your baby, it usually takes about 20 to 30 minutes - about as long as most babies breastfeed.

If you're expressing because your baby can't breastfeed, try these tips:

- if expressing one breast at a time, express until the milk slows, then switch to the other breast; repeat to express both breasts again
- switching between breasts 2 or 3 times, known as 'switch pumping or expressing' can help increase or maintain your supply
- using a double expressing kit to express both breasts at the same time saves time, and helps increase the stimulation to help your body produce milk
- you might find it helpful to cut openings in a firm bra to hold the breast pump shields in place and express 'hands-free' - we can help you try this
- gently compressing your breasts while using a breast pump, known as 'breast compression', can help milk flow, increase your supply, and make expressing quicker.

## How much milk should you get?

In the first few days after birth, you may only get a few drops or up to a couple of millilitres (mLs) of milk each time.

As your early breastmilk (colostrum) changes to mature milk, the amount slowly increases. By the end of the first week, you'll probably get about 50 to 70mLs with each expression. If your baby is taking some breastmilk with feeds, then you won't see this much.

Milk volumes vary, but most people can provide enough milk for their baby.

Babies born at term need about 500 to 600mLs of breastmilk every 24 hours by the end of the first week.

People with twins usually make about 1100 to 1400mLs every 24 hours by the second week.

If you have a preterm baby, aim to have 500 to 600mLs by the end of the first week and about 700 to 800mLs by the end of the second week. This will help you make enough breastmilk for when your baby is older.

When you're mainly breastfeeding, you'll be able to tell you're providing enough milk by signs like your baby's weight gain and how often they need a nappy change.

If you're concerned about your milk supply, talk with your midwife, nurse, or lactation consultant.

## Storing and transporting your breastmilk

The guidelines for storing breastmilk are different for babies at home and babies in a NICU. See the table on the next page for details.

### General storage information

- Use food-grade, BPA-free containers to store breastmilk. Make sure they're very clean. Hospitals often provide containers for babies in NICU.
- Store milk in small amounts to avoid wasting it if your baby doesn't want it all.
- Store breastmilk at the back of the fridge or freezer where the temperature is more stable.
- Always chill freshly expressed breastmilk before adding it to already chilled breastmilk.
- If you're freezing your milk, chill it in the fridge first, then freeze it.
- Never reheat or refreeze milk that has been heated or defrosted.
- When transporting your milk, keep it chilled or frozen. Use a cooler with ice or freezing blocks. Check the breastmilk before you use it or transfer it to another freezer, especially if your baby is in the NICU.

### If your baby is in the NICU

- Clearly mark your expressed breastmilk with your baby's identification label, and the date and time you expressed it.
- At the Women's, we try to use your first 30 milk expressions in order (1 to 30) for your baby. After that, you can put breastmilk from 2 expressions into 1 container.
- In the NICU, we use your freshly expressed milk first, then your frozen milk after that.

### You can hire and purchase pumps from:

- Australian Breastfeeding Association – Visit their website for more information [breastfeeding.asn.au/hire-breast-pump](http://breastfeeding.asn.au/hire-breast-pump)
- The Royal Children's Hospital Equipment and Distribution Centre (03) 9345 5325 or visit [edc.@rch.org.au/edc](mailto:edc.@rch.org.au/edc)
- Some pharmacies and private companies.

## Breastmilk storage

These guidelines are for storing breastmilk at home, in the maternity ward, and for babies in the Newborn Intensive Care Unit (NICU).

**\*Note:** there are different breastmilk storage times for babies in the NICU

Breastmilk	Stored at room temperature 26°C or lower	Stored in fridge 4°C or lower	Stored in freezer Storage times vary depending on the type of freezer
Freshly expressed into a clean, food-grade container	Home or maternity ward <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Store milk for up to 6 hours</li> <li>– Use the fridge if it's available</li> </ul>	Home or maternity ward <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Store milk for no more than 72 hours (3 days)</li> <li>– Store at the back of the fridge where it's coldest</li> </ul>	Home or maternity ward <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– In the freezer compartment inside the fridge (-15°C): Store for up to 2 weeks</li> <li>– In the freezer section of a fridge with a separate door (-18°C): Store for up to 3 months</li> <li>– In a deep freeze (chest or upright manual defrost freezer that mostly stays closed and keeps a stable temperature (-20°C or lower): Store for up to 6 to 12 months</li> </ul>
	NICU <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Store milk for up to 4 hours</li> </ul>	NICU <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Store milk for no more than 48 hours (2 days)</li> <li>– Place in the fridge within 1 hour of expressing</li> <li>– Store at the back of the fridge where it's coldest</li> </ul>	NICU <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Place in freezer within 24 hours (1 day) of expressing</li> <li>– Use the same storage times and temperatures as you would at home or in the maternity ward (see above)</li> </ul>
Previously frozen (thawed in fridge but not warmed)	Use within 4 hours	Home or maternity ward Store milk for no more than 24 hours (1 day)	Don't refreeze
		NICU Store milk for no more than 36 hours (1 ½ days) from time removed from freezer	
Thawed outside fridge in warm water or warming device	Use only for completion of feeding	Home or maternity ward Throw it away, if possible. Otherwise, store it in the fridge for no more than 4 hours	Don't refreeze
		NICU Do not return to fridge	
Baby has started feeding	Only for completion of feeding, then throw it away	Throw it away	Throw it away

Adapted from: National Health and Medical Research Council (2012). *Infant Feeding Guidelines*. Canberra: National Health and Medical Research Council. [nhmrc.gov.au/about-us/publications/infant-feeding-guidelines-information-health-workers](http://nhmrc.gov.au/about-us/publications/infant-feeding-guidelines-information-health-workers)

## Cleaning the breast pump equipment

### For sick or premature babies

- Wash your hands thoroughly.
- Dismantle all parts of the breast pump kit after each use.
- Rinse all parts that touch breastmilk with cold water.
- Wash all parts in warm water with dishwashing detergent.
- Rinse thoroughly under warm running water.
- Allow to air dry on clean paper towel before storing in a clean, closed container or clean plastic bag.
- If your baby is in the NICU, we recommend disinfecting the breast pump equipment every day. You can disinfect equipment by boiling, using a chemical disinfectant, or a home steam steriliser. Always follow the manufacturer's instructions for chemical disinfection and home steam sterilisers.

### Boiling method of disinfection

- Wash your hands thoroughly.
- Thoroughly clean all parts as described above.
- Put all parts of the breast pump kit into a large pot of water, making sure they're completely covered. Bring the water to the boil and keep it boiling rapidly for 5 minutes. Make sure all parts stay fully underwater the whole time.
- Remove all the parts carefully without touching the inside surfaces. Use long-handled tongs, that were disinfected along with the breast pump kit.
- Allow to air dry on clean paper towel before storing in a clean, closed container or clean plastic bag.

### For healthy, term babies

Follow the manufacturer's instructions or visit the Australian Breastfeeding Association website for cleaning information: [breastfeeding.asn.au/resources/cleaning-expressing-equipment](https://breastfeeding.asn.au/resources/cleaning-expressing-equipment)

## For more information and advice

Contact your local Maternal & Child Health Nurse.

### Victorian Maternal & Child Health Line

Call 13 22 29 any time of day or night to speak with a maternal and child health nurse.

### Australian Breastfeeding Association Breastfeeding Helpline

Call 1800 686 268 any time of day or night to speak with a breastfeeding counsellor.

Visit their website to learn about:

- Breastfeeding your premature baby [breastfeeding.asn.au/resources/breastfeeding-your-premature-baby](https://breastfeeding.asn.au/resources/breastfeeding-your-premature-baby)
- Cleaning expressing equipment [breastfeeding.asn.au/resources/cleaning-expressing-equipment](https://breastfeeding.asn.au/resources/cleaning-expressing-equipment)
- Engorgement [breastfeeding.asn.au/resources/engorgement](https://breastfeeding.asn.au/resources/engorgement)

### The Women's

Visit our website for breastfeeding fact sheets in English and other languages:

- [thewomens.org.au/health-information/fact-sheets#breastfeeding-all-fact-sheets-in-english](https://thewomens.org.au/health-information/fact-sheets#breastfeeding-all-fact-sheets-in-english)
- [thewomens.org.au/health-information/fact-sheets#breastfeeding-all-fact-sheets-in-other-languages](https://thewomens.org.au/health-information/fact-sheets#breastfeeding-all-fact-sheets-in-other-languages)

## Do you need an interpreter?



Interpreter

You can ask for an interpreter if you need one.

## Family Violence Support

### 1800 Respect National Helpline

You can get help if you have experienced sexual assault, domestic or family violence and abuse.

You can call 1800 737 732 any time of day or night or visit [1800respect.org.au](https://1800respect.org.au)