

Collecting and storing donor breast milk in milk banks

Information for the public

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About this information

NICE clinical guidelines advise the NHS on caring for people with specific conditions or diseases and the treatments they should receive. The information applies to people using the NHS in England and Wales.

This information explains the advice about collecting and storing donor breast milk in milk banks that is set out in NICE clinical guideline 93.

Does this information apply to me?

Yes, if you are woman who is donating breast milk or who would like to donate breast milk.

The advice in the NICE guideline covers how milk banks should recruit, screen and support women who donate breast milk; and how milk banks should handle and process the breast milk they receive from donors.

The advice in the NICE guideline does not specifically look at:

- how donated breast milk is used after it leaves the milk bank
- the care and treatment of babies who receive donated breast milk
- how mothers should handle and store breast milk for their own babies.

Your care

In the NHS, patients and healthcare professionals have rights and responsibilities as set out in the NHS Constitution (www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-nhs-constitution-for-england). All NICE guidance is written to reflect these.

You have the right to be involved in discussions and make informed decisions about donating breast milk. To help you make decisions, staff at the milk bank should explain fully about donating breast milk. You should be given relevant information that is suitable for you and reflects any religious, ethnic, or cultural needs you have. It should also take into account whether you have any physical or learning disability, sight or hearing problem or language difficulties. You should have access to an interpreter or advocate (someone who helps you put your views across) if needed.

All screening should be performed with your informed consent. Healthcare professionals should follow the Department of Health's advice on consent (www.gov.uk/government/publications/reference-guide-to-consent-for-examination-or-treatment-second-editionhttp://www.dh.gov.uk/en/DH_103643) and the code of practice for the Mental Capacity Act. Information about the Act and consent issues is available from www.nhs.uk/CarersDirect/moneyandlegal/legal. In Wales healthcare professionals should follow advice on consent from the Welsh Government (www.wales.nhs.uk/consent).

Donating breast milk

Breast milk is the ideal food for babies. It gives them all the nourishment they need in their first 6 months and has important benefits for their health and development, both immediately and as they grow. Breast milk is particularly important for premature and ill babies, but sometimes mothers of these babies are unable to provide breast milk. In this situation, the baby may be given breast milk that has been donated by another breastfeeding mother and stored by a breast milk bank.

It is important to note that this information is only about the donation of breast milk, and details may differ from information given to mothers who are breastfeeding their own babies.

Can I donate my breast milk?

If you are breastfeeding and are interested in becoming a breast milk donor, contact your nearest milk bank (for more information, see [More information](#)).

Staff at the milk bank should first give you some information about donating milk; this will advise you that you won't be able to donate if you:

- smoke or are using nicotine products to help you give up smoking
- regularly drink more than 1 to 2 units of alcohol, once or twice a week (the recommended limit for breastfeeding mothers)
- are using, or have recently used, recreational drugs
- have tested positive for HIV 1 or 2, hepatitis B or C, human T-lymphotropic virus (HTLV) I or II, or syphilis
- know that you have an increased risk of Creutzfeldt–Jakob disease (CJD; for more information about this, visit www.hpa.org.uk/cjd and click on 'Information leaflets for patients and healthcare professionals').

If you think you could be a suitable donor, staff at the milk bank should arrange a convenient time to meet or talk with you about becoming a donor. They should also explain that all potential donors need to have blood tests for infections that could be passed on through breast milk. They should ask you for your consent to have these tests.

It should be explained to you that you will need to go through a screening process before you can donate milk. First you should be asked some questions about your medical history, and your general health and lifestyle. These questions should be asked as part of an informal discussion, but milk bank staff may also ask you to fill in a questionnaire (or help you to do so). If any information is needed from your medical records they should ask for your consent to look at these.

You should be asked:

- about your health and the health of your baby
- whether you are having any medical treatment or taking any prescribed drugs
- if you have had any recent medical tests done (for example, have you had an X-ray that involved you being injected with a radioactive substance?)
- whether you have had any recent exposure to infection
- if your job or your home environment mean that you have come into contact with high levels of environmental or chemical contaminants (for example, if the water supply you use has been contaminated)
- whether you are exposed to cigarette smoke anywhere (for example, if you live with a heavy smoker).

Milk bank staff should explain that whether you can donate depends on both the answers to these questions and the results of your blood tests.

If you want to donate breast milk that you have already expressed, you should be asked to answer the screening questions for the period when you expressed the milk.

Milk bank staff should arrange for you to give a blood sample for testing. They should explain that results from any earlier antenatal blood tests you have had cannot be used instead. Your blood will be tested for:

- HIV 1 and 2
- hepatitis B and C
- HTLV I and II
- syphilis.

When the results of your blood tests are available, a staff member from the milk bank should arrange to see you to discuss them with you, or should discuss them with you by telephone. They may inform you in writing if that's what you prefer. If you need some support after receiving your test results, you should be offered as much help and support as you need, which should include information about counselling and local support groups.

If there is a reason why you are not suitable to donate milk after you have been through the screening process, any milk that you have already donated will not be used.

What happens next if I am suitable to donate?

If you are eligible to donate milk after the screening process, the milk bank should ask you for your consent for your milk to be processed and used as donated milk.

During the time that you are donating milk, you should not normally be asked to have more blood tests. However, you should be asked frequently about your general health. You should be asked to contact the milk bank immediately if your circumstances change in a way that affects the answers you gave to the screening questions (for example, if you become ill or start taking medication; see [How long can I donate for?](#)).

What help will I be given to start donating milk?

Before you start donating, you should be given advice and practical help by milk bank staff. This should be given in person if possible, but you should also receive additional information by telephone and in writing. Milk bank staff should arrange with you the most convenient time and place to show you everything you need to know about donating and how your milk should be stored.

Your training should include advice about your diet and your alcohol consumption. It should also cover how to:

- wash your hands thoroughly and why this is important
- express and collect your breast milk, including how to clean and use any breast pumps and milk containers you are using
- label milk for donation with your name and date of expression
- store your milk and record how it has been stored
- transport your milk to the milk bank (if this has been agreed with you).

After helping you to start donating, milk bank staff should give you as much one-to-one support as you need while you are donating milk. This should include practical help in

collecting your milk and advice about dealing with changes in your supply, and also emotional support if you need it.

Once you are donating, if your milk is regularly found to have microorganisms (such as bacteria) above a certain level, milk bank staff should offer you advice and support to help you reduce accidental contamination when collecting your milk.

How long can I donate for?

Milk bank staff should discuss with you how long you can continue to donate milk. There are some circumstances where you may need to stop donating, either for a short time or permanently. Milk bank staff should ask you to contact them to discuss stopping your donations temporarily if you develop a temperature or have been exposed to a virus that causes a rash, such as measles, chicken pox or German measles (also known as rubella).

You should also contact milk bank staff to discuss stopping your donations, either temporarily or permanently, if you:

- start taking medication
- develop breast lesions or infections, such as mastitis or herpes.

Milk bank staff may also discuss with you whether to stop donating if your donated milk continues to have high levels of microorganisms (such as bacteria) after you have been receiving support for this. The milk bank should give you as much advice and support as you need if you stop donating milk.

Collecting milk for donation

Milk bank staff should advise you to collect your milk by expressing it, rather than using 'drip' milk (milk that leaks from one breast while you are feeding your baby from the other breast). You should also be encouraged to hand express your milk if possible. However, if you prefer to express your milk using a breast pump, this is also acceptable.

Storing milk for donation

Milk containers

Milk bank staff should advise you to collect and store your milk only in containers that have been supplied or approved by the milk bank. The containers should be used according to instructions given to you by the milk bank.

Freezing donated milk

You should be encouraged to freeze your milk as soon as possible after expressing it, but if you are unable to do this (for example, if you don't have much space in your freezer), you can keep all the samples that you collect over 24 hours in the fridge and then freeze them together. You should freeze all milk within 24 hours of expressing it.

While you are storing milk at home, it should remain frozen and be transported to the milk bank as soon as possible. However, if it is necessary, you can store milk in your freezer (at a temperature of -18°C or lower) for up to 3 months. If you don't have access to a freezer at your home, you may be able to store your milk at local donor milk depots or children's centres.

Milk bank staff should ask you to check and record your freezer temperature every day and should supply you with the equipment you need to do this. If you have any concerns about your freezer at home or how you are storing your milk, discuss these with staff at the milk bank.

Transporting milk to the milk bank

Milk bank staff should discuss with you how your milk will be transported to the milk bank. While some milk banks may need you to take it to them, some may offer to collect it for you using a transport company, such as a medical courier, or a member of their staff. It is important that your milk stays frozen while it is transported to the milk bank.

Questions you might like to ask the milk bank

- How soon can I start donating milk after my own baby is born?
- How often and how much milk will I be expected to donate?
- Do I live near enough to a milk bank to donate?
- Will my milk be collected from my home, and, if so, how often?
- What help will I receive if I have problems expressing milk?
- Can I still donate if I use herbal remedies?
- Do I need to provide my own equipment to donate my milk?

What happens to donated milk at the milk bank?

At the milk bank, donated milk should be checked to make sure that it has arrived safely and in good condition. Before donated milk is used, the milk bank should test it for any contamination with microorganisms (such as bacteria); this should happen within 3 months of the milk being expressed. If the milk is suitable to be used, the donated milk should then be treated using a process known as pasteurisation. This process helps to destroy unwanted or disease-causing organisms that can be found in the milk.

Once donated milk has been pasteurised, it should be kept in a freezer until it is needed by a hospital or baby unit. This may be up to 6 months after the donated milk was expressed.

From the time the milk is collected from the donor until it is given to a baby in a hospital or baby unit, records should be kept on who the milk came from, how the milk has been stored, any tests and treatment that the milk has had, and how it has been used. All records kept on donor milk should be treated as confidential.

More information

The organisations below can provide more information on donated breast milk. NICE is not responsible for the quality or accuracy of any information or advice provided by these

organisations.

- United Kingdom Association for Milk Banking, www.ukamb.org
- Bliss – the special care baby charity, 0500 618 140 www.bliss.org.uk
- The Breastfeeding Network, 0300 100 0210 www.breastfeedingnetwork.org.uk
- NCT, 0300 330 0770 www.nct.org.uk

You can also go to NHS Choices (www.nhs.uk) for more information.

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Accreditation

