

Donor Breast Milk: What You Need to Know



Highlights

Human donor breast milk from a milk bank is a great alternative if a baby is not able to get it straight from the source.

Milk banks test and pasteurise donor breast milk to make sure there is nothing in it that could harm a baby.

It is also possible to source donor breast milk informally through social media networks, but there are some important safety issues to consider.

If you are considering donor milk, it's important to know the benefits and risks first.

In This Article

What is donor breast milk?

Where can I get donor breast milk?

When can donor breast milk help?

How do milk banks work?

Is donor breast milk safe?

Can I donate breast milk?

Can I use baby formula instead of donor milk?

Tools And Assistance

What is donor breast milk?

A mother's breast milk is the best possible nutrition for a newborn baby. A very good alternative is human donor breast milk. Donor milk is expressed by another woman and given to a milk bank.

Donor milk can be especially helpful for sick or premature babies who can't receive their own mother's milk.

Where can I get donor breast milk?

Women breastfeeding other mothers' babies isn't a new concept. Informal sharing of breast milk has been documented in maternity wards since the 1940s.

Parents usually get donor breast milk through:

Milk banks - usually connected to a hospital neonatal intensive care unit (NICU).

Informal networks on social media.

If you are considering donor milk, it's important to know the benefits and risks.

When can donor breast milk help?

Sometimes it's hard for mothers of premature babies to make enough milk. Breast milk has special proteins called antibodies. These antibodies protect children from infections and diseases. Giving donor breast milk to sick or premature babies helps nourish them and protect them from disease.

Research shows that, compared with infant formula, human donor milk can lower the risk of infections and a severe gut disorder in low birth weight babies.

A baby doesn't have to be premature or low birth weight to get donor breast milk. Donor milk can help when:

Your baby is born with the help of a surrogate.

You have adopted or fostered your baby.

How do milk banks work?

Breastfeeding women express breast milk, freeze it, and deliver it to the milk bank. Sometimes the milk bank can pick it up.

Formal milk banks screen women to make sure they are healthy (see 'Is donor breast milk safe?', below).

The milk bank may give sterilised collection bottles, labels, and breast pumps. They will give instructions for women on how to transport and store the milk safely.

The milk bank pasteurises the milk to kill any viruses or bacteria. Milk banks do not pay donors.

Is donor breast milk safe?

Breast milk is a human bodily fluid that can, in rare cases, transmit viruses like HIV and hepatitis C, as well as bacteria and other germs.

Formal milk banks must test and pasteurise donor breast milk. This is to make sure there is nothing in it that could harm a baby.

Milk banks also screen donors to make sure they don't have any medical conditions or lifestyle factors that could affect their breast milk.

Donor breast milk from private networks is not properly processed or pasteurised. The networks typically provide guidelines about screening donors and storing and transporting breast milk safely. It's important to understand the possible risks before you use a donor's milk for your baby.

Can I donate breast milk?

Milk banks have specific criteria for who can donate breast milk, and it is best to contact them directly to see if you can donate.

The milk bank will do a blood test on you and ask you questions about your lifestyle - as though you were donating blood. You might be asked:

Whether you have a health condition

If you have ever tested positive for diseases such as HIV, hepatitis B, hepatitis C

What medicines you are taking

How much alcohol and caffeine you consume

Whether you smoke, use nicotine patches, or use recreational drugs

Can I use baby formula instead of donor milk?

Sick and premature babies need extra nutrition and fluids so they can 'catch up' with their growth. Breast milk is best, but it's not always an option for parents. Special baby formula designed for pre-term babies will also meet their nutritional needs.

For other babies, commercial infant formulas have enough nutrients for healthy growth. Formula is the only safe alternative to breast milk for babies under 12 months.

Tools and Assistance

If you are considering using donor breast milk or have questions about how to go about it, here are some steps and tools to help:

Milk banks: Research local milk banks in your area to see if they accept donations or if they can provide donor milk for your baby.

Breastfeeding support groups: Consider joining online or local groups that offer advice and share resources regarding breastfeeding and donor milk.

Lactation consultants: Consulting with a lactation expert can provide you with personalized guidance on breastfeeding or how to supplement your baby's diet with donor milk.

Health care providers: Talk to your pediatrician, obstetrician, or midwife about the benefits and risks of donor breast milk for your baby's specific needs. They can help guide you through the process and ensure the safety of the milk.

Social media networks: Some people use social media to connect with other

parents who may offer donor milk. However, always proceed with caution and consider the safety of both the donor and your baby. It's crucial to verify any donor's health and the milk's handling and storage practices.

If you have concerns or need further assistance with donor breast milk, don't hesitate to reach out to relevant health professionals for support.