

Can I Feed My Baby Breast Milk From Another Woman?

Informal (Peer-to-Peer) Human Milk Sharing

Your own milk is best to feed your baby. When you can't feed your baby your own milk, 'pasteurized donor human milk' from an official milk bank is the next best choice.

What is pasteurized donor human milk?

Human milk donated to an official milk bank. The milk is treated to kill any harmful bacteria or viruses. Women who donate milk are checked for health concerns that could be passed to your baby. The milk is tested before and after being treated to make sure it is safe.

Pasteurized milk from a milk bank is usually only available for premature, ill, or high-risk babies because there is a limited supply. When milk from a milk bank is not available for your baby, the recommended choice is infant formula.

Why do women use breast milk from other women?

Some parents feel the benefits of breast milk are more important to their babies health and don't want to expose them to the potential risks of formula. Parents choose to use milk from other mothers (called 'informal' or 'peer-to-peer' milk sharing) which is usually not treated to kill harmful bacteria or viruses.

Parents get unpasteurized milk from family members, friends, milk-sharing websites, or buy online.

Health Canada, the Canadian Paediatric Society, and the Human Milk Banking Association of North America do not endorse the use of unpasteurized donor human milk.

Possible dangers of sharing breast milk

- It's difficult to know that a donor's health and life style is safe for milk sharing.
- Mothers can be sick with serious viruses and not know it. Some of these can be passed to your baby through the shared milk (such as HIV, Hepatitis B and C, Cytomegalovirus (CMV), and human T-cell lymphotropic virus).
- If milk is not collected and stored the right way, bacteria will grow in it and could make your baby sick.
- Smoking, alcohol, some medicines (both ones prescribed by a doctor and those bought over the counter), herbal supplements, and street drugs can all pass into human milk.
- Milk bought online could be diluted with water, cow's milk, or something else to increase the amount for sale.

Talk with your healthcare provider first before you give your baby milk from an informal donor. Make sure you understand the risks and benefits to your baby.

Higher risks for premature and sick babies

- The risks of using informally shared milk are higher for premature and sick babies because of them get more infections and other illnesses.
- Cytomegalovirus (CMV) (say *sy-toe-MEG-a-low-vy-rus*) is a common virus that 60 to 70 percent of child-bearing age women have. It rarely causes symptoms for mothers, but can be passed to your baby, through human milk. Most healthy babies will not get sick, but in premature babies, it can cause problems such as jaundice, fever, liver problems, lung infections, and serious blood infections.

For more information

BC Women's Provincial Milk Bank
www.bcwomens.ca (search milk bank)

Health Canada
Safety of Donor Human Milk in Canada
www.hc-sc.gc.ca/index-eng.php

Healthy Families BC
Safe Handling, Storage, and Transport of Human Milk and other breastfeeding topics
www.healthyfamiliesbc.ca

For more HealthLinkBC File topics, visit
www.HealthLinkBC.ca/healthfiles
or your local public health unit.

Non-emergency health information
www.HealthLinkBC.ca or call 8-1-1

Reducing the risks

- Know the donor's health and lifestyle.
- Know who should not donate milk.
- Know the donor's blood test results. (Donor blood tests should be recent and reviewed by a healthcare provider.)
- Visit the BC Women's Provincial Milk Bank website for an understanding of their detailed donor screening process. Staff at the Milk Bank cannot talk to you about or test the safety of your donor's milk.
- If the donor is a close family member or friend, this could reduce the risk (but not necessarily). Sometimes it is hard to ask sensitive lifestyle questions to family members and friends.
- Limit the number of donors.
- Have regular, face to face, contact with the donor.
- Do not use milk purchased online.
- Work with the donor to ensure the milk is handled and stored (including transporting) as safely as possible.
- In-home heat treatment, also known as 'flash heating' is not proven to make donor milk safe for your baby.