

Can I Feed My Baby Milk From Another Person?

Informal (Peer-to-Peer) Human Milk Sharing

Your own milk is best for feeding 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.

Using pasteurized donor human milk

Human milk donated to an official milk bank is pasteurized to kill any harmful bacteria or viruses. People 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.

Using human milk from other people

Some parents feel the benefits of human 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 people (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 by buying it online.

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

Possible dangers of sharing human milk

- It's difficult to know that a donor's health and life style is safe for milk sharing.
- Donors 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 kept 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 or CMV (say *sy-toe-meg-ah-low-vy-rus*) is a common virus in about 60 to 70 percent of people of child-bearing age. It rarely causes symptoms for the adult, but can be passed to a 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
bcwomens.ca (search milk bank)

Health Canada
Safety of Donor Human Milk in Canada
tinyurl.com/DonorHumanMilk

HealthLinkBC
Safe handling, storage, and transport of human milk and other feeding topics
healthlinkbc.ca/pregnancy-parenting/parenting-babies-0-12-months/breastfeeding

More HealthLinkBC File topics
HealthLinkBC.ca/healthfiles or your local public health unit.

Other non-emergency health information
HealthLinkBC.ca or call 8-1-1

Your local Public Health Unit

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.
- 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.
- Do not use human milk bought online.