



Colostrum Collection

How to hand express and store colostrum before birth

Why would I collect colostrum before my baby is born?

You don't have to. Prenatal colostrum collection is optional. But if your provider agrees that it is appropriate for you, having a small supply of your own colostrum available after birth can be useful if your baby has difficulty feeding, needs extra monitoring, or needs supplementation.

Colostrum is the first milk your breasts make. It is thick, concentrated and made in small amounts. That is normal. Your baby's stomach is also very small, so those small amounts are exactly what newborns are designed to receive.

Why this can matter on Day 1

Your milk does not suddenly "come in" in large amounts on the day your baby is born. Colostrum is the normal first milk. Milk volume usually increases over the next several days, often around Day 3 to 5, and it can take longer for some parents, especially after a surgical birth.

If your baby has an unexpected procedure or another medical reason for supplementation, you may hear, "Your milk hasn't come in yet." If supplementation is medically recommended, having expressed colostrum available gives you something else to discuss with your baby's care team. It also helps you understand that producing only drops of colostrum on Day 1 is not a sign that you have failed

Before birth, ask your hospital:

"If my baby is breathing normally, when would you suction my baby's mouth or stomach?"

"If supplementation is recommended, can my expressed colostrum be used first when appropriate?"

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Who might benefit most?

Prenatal expression may be particularly useful when a baby is more likely to need supplementation, such as when there is a risk of low blood sugar or feeding difficulty. The strongest research is in pregnancies affected by diabetes. Evidence is still developing for routine prenatal colostrum collection in all pregnancies.

When should I start?

Do not begin without checking with your pregnancy care provider. Cleveland Clinic recommends discussing it first and generally starting at or after 36 weeks. If you have a risk of preterm labor or another pregnancy complication, your provider may recommend that you wait or not express during pregnancy.

How do I hand express colostrum?

1. Wash your hands. Use a clean container or sterile syringe as directed by your hospital or lactation professional.
2. Get comfortable and warm. A warm shower or compress may help.
3. Place your thumb and finger in a C shape about 1 inch behind the nipple.
4. Press gently back toward your chest, then compress and release. Move around the breast.
5. Collect the drops. Do not expect a stream. Colostrum often comes in tiny drops.
6. Follow your provider's or hospital's instructions for frequency. Cleveland Clinic recommends no more than twice a day and no longer than 10 minutes per session.

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How much should I get?

There is no "right" amount. A few drops may be all you collect. Some people collect more; some collect nothing. The amount you collect during pregnancy does not predict your milk supply after birth.

How should I store it?

Label each container with the date and follow your hospital's instructions. If you will not use it soon, freeze it. Current CDC guidance for freshly expressed human milk is:

Storage	Guidance
Room temperature, 77°F or cooler	Up to 4 hours
Refrigerator, 40°F or cooler	Up to 4 days
Freezer, 0°F or colder	About 6 months is best; up to 12 months is acceptable
Thawed, previously frozen	Use within 24 hours in the refrigerator. Do not refreeze

Ask your hospital how it wants you to transport frozen colostrum. Hospitals have different labeling and storage policies. Some recommend having a support person bring it after the baby is born.

When should I stop?

Stop expressing and contact your maternity care team if it causes regular contractions, bleeding, leaking fluid, or other concerning symptoms. Follow your provider's advice if you have any risk factors for preterm birth or other complications.

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What do I really need to remember?

- You do **not** have to collect colostrum before birth.
- You do **not** need a freezer full of colostrum.
- Getting little or none before birth does **not** predict low milk supply.
- Frequent feeding in the first days is normal and does not automatically mean your baby is not getting enough.
- If supplementation is recommended, ask why, what the goal is, and whether your expressed colostrum can be used.
- Learn your hospital's policies about routine newborn suctioning before you give birth.

The bottom line

Prenatal colostrum collection is a tool, not a requirement. If your provider agrees that it is appropriate, learning to hand express can give you a useful skill and a small amount of your own colostrum to have available after birth. Just as important, knowing what normal early milk production looks like can help you recognize the difference between a normal Day 1 and a true feeding problem.

This handout is educational and is not a substitute for individualized medical advice. Follow your own pregnancy care provider's and hospital's recommendations.

Sources

- American Heart Association & American Academy of Pediatrics. 2025 Neonatal Resuscitation Guidelines.
- ACOG. Breastfeeding Challenges.
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- University of Utah Health. Collecting Colostrum: What Lactation Consultants Want You to Know, 2025.