

# Why mother's milk is best for baby



## YOUR HEALTH

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**H**uman babies need nurturing from the time they are born until they are able to fend for themselves.

For the first six months of life the best food for the baby is mother's milk. Many infant formula manufacturers have tried to duplicate breast milk, but they have not yet been successful.

All animals have different digestive systems and nutritional requirements. Breast milk is ideally formulated for digestion by human babies. (Cow's milk is best for the calf). Human milk provides all the baby's requirements. In addition to energy, it contains immunoglobulins from the mother. This protects the baby against infectious diseases to which the mother has already been exposed or has received immunisation.

Human females are born with two breasts. These start to develop during puberty and become functional during pregnancy. Hormones are released during pregnancy which makes the breast grow and start functioning.

In the first few days after birth the milk is called colostrum. It provides easily digestible nutrition and immunoglobulins to prevent disease. Within a few days, this becomes proper milk which is released as per demand under the influence of hormones.

Milk production is a "letdown" reflex, so, as the baby suckles and stimulates the nipple, milk is constantly produced. Milk may also be produced on the side from which the baby is not feeding, causing some leakage. When the baby stops feeding, the milk production stops as the letdown reflex ceases. The milk does not stay in the breast like in a refrigerator. If you miss feeding for a few hours, the milk will not spoil.

Milk can be expressed from the breast and stored outside. It can be kept at room temperature for four

hours, refrigerated for four days and frozen for four months. This expressed milk can be warmed and fed to the baby as required.

Sometimes, the woman feels that the breast milk is not adequate because when she expresses the milk, she feels that a sufficient amount is not coming out. It is enough if the baby sleeps for two to three hours after feeding and passes adequate amounts of urine.

A tablet called metoclopramide is sometimes prescribed twice a day 10 minutes before food to establish and increase lactation. A simple natural way to do this is to drink a glass of water before feeding the baby and then another glass as soon as you finish. Also, eat an adequate, nutritious diet. Sit up and feed the baby and hold its head up at a 45° angle so that both of you are comfortable. The room should not be too hot or cold. It should be quiet and peaceful. If the mother is

under a lot of stress, enough milk may not be produced.

Milk is the only food that the baby requires for six months or 180 days. After that natural weaning foods can be introduced.

Breast milk can be continued for one or two years. Breastfeeding may

produce amenorrhoea (absence of menstruation) but it does not inhibit ovulation, so you can become pregnant while breastfeeding.

Sometimes milk is produced in a non-pregnant woman or even in a man. This is a condition called galactorrhoea. It needs investigations with blood tests and scans.

This milk secretion may occur under the influence of hormones secreted by the pituitary gland like prolactin or thyroid stimulating hormone. Medications such as anti-psychotics, anti-depressants or even anti-acidity drugs can increase prolactin levels and produce milk. Continuous irritation of the breast by tight clothing or renal failure can also cause lactation.

Breast milk is a living, dynamic substance, uniquely designed to nourish and protect babies during their most vulnerable stage of life. You must ensure that the baby gets it for optimal growth.



The writer has a family practice at Vellore and is the author of *Staying Healthy in Modern India*. If you have any questions on health issues please write to [yourhealthgm@yahoo.co.in](mailto:yourhealthgm@yahoo.co.in)