

Hand Expressing Your Breasts

The hand expression of breast milk, also called manual expression, is a technique where you use your hands instead of your baby or a breast pump to remove breast milk from your breasts.

Hand expressing breast milk in the early days postpartum is invaluable. It helps to stimulate milk production and improve long term milk production. During the engorgement phase of milk production, the breasts may be swollen and congested. During this transition period, it can sometimes be difficult for a breast pump to do the job of removing milk. Recent research has shown that hand expressing breastmilk can be very beneficial for the breastfeeding mother and it is a useful skill for any nursing mother to have. Hand expressing relieves the fullness and discomfort of engorgement, the breast massage helps to move the milk through the milk ducts hand expressing can stimulate milk production. Additional research indicates that the more hand expression is used during the first couple of weeks after delivery, the better long term milk production is. We also recommend massaging your breasts when using your breast pump, you will get more milk and it will be a higher fat content.

Your lactation nurses in the hospital where you deliver can teach you how to hand express, your lactation consultant at Children's Clinic can also teach you how to do this. Just ask!

These tips may help:

- Before you start, wash your hands thoroughly with soap and warm water.
- Some mothers find gently massaging their breasts before expressing helps their milk to let down.
- Cup your breast with one hand then, with your other hand, form a "C" shape with your forefinger and thumb.
- Squeeze gently, keeping your finger and thumb near the darker area around your nipple (areola) but not on it (don't squeeze the nipple itself as you could make it sore). This shouldn't hurt.
- Release the pressure, then repeat, building up a rhythm. Try not to slide your fingers over the skin.
- Drops should start to appear, and then your milk usually starts to flow.
- If no drops appear, try moving your finger and thumb slightly, but still avoid the darker area.
- When the flow slows down, move your fingers round to a different section of your breast, and repeat.
- When the flow from one breast has slowed, swap to the other breast. Keep changing breasts until your milk drips very slowly or stops altogether.

In learning this new skill, it can be helpful to see how it's done. We have included links to hand expression videos below so you can explore techniques through professional videos:

Hand expression videos:

<https://med.stanford.edu/newborns/professional-education/breastfeeding/hand-expressing-milk.html>

<https://www.unicef.org.uk/babyfriendly/baby-friendly-resources/video/hand-expression/>

<https://www.healthyfamiliesbc.ca/home/articles/video-hand-expressing-breastmilk>