

Antenatal Breast Milk Harvesting Jeannine Cini

Breast milk is considered the gold standard and normative method of infant feeding. In the past, expressing colostrum by hand during the late stage of pregnancy was well supported in order to potentially encourage breast milk/colostrum production and enhance breastfeeding outcomes. This is known as breast milk or colostrum harvesting. The trend of breast milk harvesting is on the rise again. Antenatal breast milk or colostrum harvesting is the collection of hand expressed human milk in the last weeks of pregnancy. This is usually encouraged from 36 to 37 weeks onwards (Singh et al., 2009).

Post-delivery, mothers tend to produce small amounts of colostrum, which increases steadily, day by day. This is a natural, normal process. It is for this reason that, at the beginning, newborn infants need to be fed small, frequent amounts of colostrum. However, at times, the beginning of a breastfeeding journey can be challenging. This is why the harvesting of breast milk antenatally can be useful when the going gets tough! Newborn infants who find difficulty with latching to the breast can be fed regular, small amounts of harvested breast milk, until able to do so. Studies have shown that newborns who needed further supplementation over and above breastfeeding, and were administered harvested breastmilk, had a higher rate of achieving breastfeeding quicker.

There are several circumstances where expecting mothers can benefit from breast milk harvesting. These include mothers experiencing a multiple pregnancy, mothers with diabetes, mothers who had breast surgery in the past and mothers who are on medication for high blood pressure (Casey et al., 2019). Moreover, breast milk harvesting is also beneficial in the off chance the baby develops jaundice, whereby colostrum helps lower its level (Zanardo et al., 2007). In particular circumstances, when a mother needs to start special treatment right after birth which is incompatible to breastfeeding, breast milk harvesting can be put to good use.

Harvested breast milk can be stored in small amounts, such as 1ml to 2ml, using syringes. Once collected, the syringes can be stored in a freezer. Breast milk can be stored for up to three months in a freezer. When ready to use, the breast milk in the syringe is thawed and warmed up, administered to the baby either by finger feeding or via a supplementar.

Breast milk harvesting provides a healthy option and start to a breastfeeding journey. Get in touch with a midwife for further information.

References

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