

Informal (Peer-to-Peer) Human Milk Sharing

Your own milk is the best way to feed your baby. When your milk is not available, for whatever reason, pasteurized donor human milk from an official milk bank is the next best choice.

What is Pasteurized Donor Human Milk?

Human milk donated to an official milk bank. The milk is treated to kill any harmful bacteria or viruses. Donors are screened and the milk is tested before and after being treated to ensure safety.

Due to a limited supply, milk from an official milk bank is usually only available for premature, ill, or high-risk infants. When milk from an official milk bank is not available, the recommended choice is infant formula.

What is Informal (Peer-to-Peer) Milk Sharing?

Some parents feel the benefits of breast milk outweigh the potential risks of formula. Informal milk sharing (sometimes called peer-to-peer milk sharing) is human milk that is:

- obtained from family members, friends, a milk-sharing website, or purchased online;
- usually is not treated to kill any harmful bacteria or viruses.

If you are thinking about giving your baby milk from an informal donor, talk with your health care provider first to discuss the risks and benefits of all feeding options.

Risks of Informal Milk Sharing

- It's difficult to know for sure that a donor's health and lifestyle is safe for milk sharing.
- Viruses such as HIV, Hepatitis B and C, CMV, and human T-cell lymphotropic virus could be passed to your baby (the donor mother may not know that she has these).
- If human milk is not collected and stored properly, bacterial growth could make your baby sick.
- Smoking, alcohol, some medications (both prescription and over the counter), herbal supplements, and street drugs can all pass into human milk.
- Milk purchased online may be diluted with water or cow's milk, or something else may be added.

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

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INFORMATION FOR FAMILIES: Informal (Peer-to-Peer) Human Milk Sharing (*cont'd.*)

Minimizing the Risks

- Know the donor's health and lifestyle; know who shouldn't donate milk.
- Know the donor's blood test results – donor blood tests should be recent and reviewed by a health care provider.
- Visit the BC Women's Provincial Milk Bank website for an understanding of their detailed donor screening process. BC Women's staff cannot provide counseling on milk sharing and cannot test milk.
- If the donor is a close family member or friend, this may reduce the risk (but not necessarily). Some mothers find it difficult to ask lifestyle questions of family members/friends.
- Limit the number of donors.
- Have ongoing contact with the donor; face to face is best.
- Do not purchase milk online.
- Work with the donor to ensure the milk is handled, stored, and transported safely as possible.
- Be aware that in-home heat treatment, also known as flash heating, has not been studied or proven effective in informal milk-sharing situations.

For More Information

- BC Women's Provincial Milk Bank: www.bcwomens.ca search milk bank
- Health Canada – Safety of Donor Human Milk in Canada: www.hc-sc.gc.ca/index-eng.php
- Healthy Families BC – Safe Handling, Storage, and Transport of Human Milk and other breastfeeding topics: www.healthyfamiliesbc.ca

For more HealthLinkBC File topics, visit www.HealthLinkBC.ca/healthfiles or your local public health unit.

Click on www.HealthLinkBC.ca or call 8-1-1 for non-emergency health info.

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West Tower, #350, 555 West 12th Avenue
Vancouver, BC Canada V5Z 3X7
604-877-2121*