

INFORMATION FOR FAMILIES:

Informal (peer-to-peer) human milk sharing

Your own milk is best for your baby. If it is not available, pasteurized donor human milk from an official milk bank is the next best choice. Some parents use unpasteurized donor human milk from family, friends, or online groups—this is called informal (peer-to-peer) milk sharing.

The information below is to assist you with making an informed decision to keep your baby safe.

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.

1 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 often only available for premature, ill, or high-risk infants. When human milk from an official milk bank is not available, the recommended choice is commercial infant formula.

2 What is informal (peer-to-peer) milk sharing?

Some parents feel the benefits of human 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, discuss all feeding options first with your health care provider.

3 Risks of informal milk sharing

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

Continued next page

4 Minimizing the risks

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

5 For more information:

BC Women's Provincial Milk Bank

www.bcwomens.ca/our-services/labour-birth-post-birth-care/milk-bank

First Nations Health Authority (FNHA)

www.fnha.ca/what-we-do/maternal-child-and-family-health/maternal-and-child-health

Contact the FNHA Maternal and Child Health Program for breastfeeding supports in local First Nations communities. Call FNHA toll-free at 1-800-317-7878.

Health Canada

Safety of Donor Human Milk in Canada:

<https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/canada-food-guide/resources/nutrition-healthy-term-infants/safety-donor-human-milk-canada.html>

Health Link BC

Baby's Best Chance Book:

www.healthlinkbc.ca/pregnancy-parenting/babys-best-chance

Call HealthLink BC at 8-1-1 (or 1-604-215-8110) to reach a nurse, dietitian, pharmacist, or exercise professional

Health Services

Contact your health care provider or local public health unit. Find your local public health unit:

www.healthlinkbc.ca/health-services/search-services-your-area

La Leche League

Connect with a La Leche League leader for mother-to-mother/parent-to-parent peer support

<https://www.lllc.ca>