

Hand Expression: Topic of the Month

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Many steps make the breastfeeding journey a success, and having a good milk supply is one important part. Milk production is regulated by milk removal; when an individual is having difficulty latching or maintaining their supply, they must find another way to express their milk. Milk expression can be done by hand or with a manual or electric breast pump. This article will focus on hand expression and will start with the benefits.

Benefits of hand expression

- Provide extra stimulation for the breast.
- Maximize colostrum withdrawal.
- Increase milk production and removal.
- Promote efficient breast drainage.
- Softens the areola to help the baby latch.
- Increase fat and calorie content of milk.
- Provide a spoonful that can be fed to a sleepy baby and can soothe a baby having difficulty latching.
- It's free and always available!

Early stimulation of the breast is essential to building a strong milk supply. Studies have found that hand expression can be more effective at removing colostrum, boosting production, and increasing the duration of breastfeeding than pumping alone. Hand expression is especially effective when the breast is engorged, where the warm touch and massage can help move fluids out of the way to release the milk more effectively.

Hand expression is a great tool to support breastfeeding and reduce the need for supplementation. Many have found that learning how to hand express has made them more comfortable with touching and handling their breasts. Education about hand expression ahead of time can also reduce frustration and anxiety for the new parent. Every pregnant person should be encouraged to learn the benefits of and how to perform hand expression.

Postnatal hand expression

Postnatal hand expressions are done after the baby is born. Postnatal hand expression has long been found to be an effective way to stimulate the breast and release colostrum. If there is trouble latching right from the start or the baby needs to be separated from the parent after birth, hand expression of colostrum can provide the essential nutrients, antibodies, and many more protective factors. Additionally, learning and practicing hand expression within the first few days after birth gives the parent a convenient tool that is free and available on demand.

Prenatal hand expression

Prenatal or 'Antenatal' expression of milk is the practice of expressing milk during one's pregnancy. Long thought to be a risk to premature labor, studies have now found that to be untrue. Some medical conditions make it harder to establish breastfeeding after birth, such as a parent who has planned a cesarean birth, diabetes, a breast abnormality, or an infant with cleft lip, cleft palate, or Down syndrome. For these parents, prenatal hand expression can support the baby by getting stored colostrum quickly after birth. A breast pump should not be used to collect milk while still pregnant.

WIC education should focus on postnatal hand expression and refer to one's healthcare provider for information and support about prenatal hand expression.

Expected amounts

When a parent first tries hand expression, they will likely only see a few drops of milk; this is normal. With practice and as they become comfortable with expressing themselves by hand, they will notice the amount increase. Total production of colostrum in the first day of life averages 1-2 ounces and will double each day that follows. To break it down further, that is about a teaspoon per feeding on day one, then 2-3 teaspoons per feeding on days 2-3. Since colostrum is thick and rich, small amounts are all the baby needs. By days 4-5, mature milk should arrive, and the volume of milk will increase significantly.

Counseling

As discussed, it is never too early to start talking about hand expression. The choice of how to feed one's baby is a personal one, and some participants may not yet have decided, while others may be resistant. It is important to keep an open mind when speaking to participants about their feeding choices. Using open-ended questions such as "What are your thoughts

about breastfeeding?” or “Have you and your partner discussed breastfeeding?” is a great way to begin the conversation.

Discussion about hand expression may be framed as a beneficial tool to support breastfeeding. Hand expression is simple to learn and, with practice, can become easy. Asking questions such as “What have you heard about hand expression?” and “Can I share with you what I have learned about hand expression?” may get the participant interested in learning more. There are many resources out there to support parents in the technique. It may be helpful to keep a list of referrals and resources specific to your agency as well.

WIC scope of practice

At WIC, it is important to know when to educate and when to refer. If you are not comfortable discussing hand expression or have not been trained in lactation support, there are many resource options to offer participants. Having an IBCLC or Peer Support person on staff, offering a referral to local lactation support or their healthcare provider, or providing a list of community resources are all great options. There are many videos and handouts as well that may introduce a new parent to the basics of hand expression; below are some examples.

Hand expression videos

- [Breastmilk Production](#) (First Droplets. Aug. 2018)
- [Hand Expression of Breastmilk](#) (Stanford University, 2006)
- [Hand Expression Video](#) (UNICEF-The Baby Friendly Initiative)
- [Expressing the First Milk](#) (Global Health Media)
 - [Global Health Media- Videos](#)- Milk expression videos are available in multiple languages; choose a language and search breastfeeding for the topic.
- [How to Hand Express Breastmilk](#) (Breastmilk Counts, Texas WIC)

Hand expression handout

- [Lactation Education Resources](#): Hand Expression of Breastmilk
 - Available in English, Spanish, Arabic, and Vietnamese.

Resources

- [Hand Expression](#). (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. April 18, 2024)
- [The Power of Hand Expression](#). (La Leche International, January 15, 2019)
- [Expressing and Pumping Milk](#). (U.S. Breastfeeding Support)

References- complete listing of hyperlinks

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[National Breastfeeding Month](https://www.usbreastfeeding.org/national-breastfeeding-month.html) (<https://www.usbreastfeeding.org/national-breastfeeding-month.html>)

[Breastmilk Production](https://vimeo.com/284639410) (<https://vimeo.com/284639410>)

[Hand Expression of Breastmilk](https://med.stanford.edu/newborns/professional-education/breastfeeding/hand-expressing-milk.html) (<https://med.stanford.edu/newborns/professional-education/breastfeeding/hand-expressing-milk.html>)

[Expressing the First Milk](https://globalhealthmedia.org/portfolio-items/expressing-the-first-milk/?portfolioCats=191%2C94%2C13%2C23%2C65) (<https://globalhealthmedia.org/portfolio-items/expressing-the-first-milk/?portfolioCats=191%2C94%2C13%2C23%2C65>)

[Hand Expression Video](https://www.unicef.org.uk/babyfriendly/baby-friendly-resources/breastfeeding-resources/hand-expression-video/) (<https://www.unicef.org.uk/babyfriendly/baby-friendly-resources/breastfeeding-resources/hand-expression-video/>)

[Global Health Media- Videos](https://globalhealthmedia.org/video/?_language=english) (https://globalhealthmedia.org/video/?_language=english)

[How to Hand Express Breastmilk](https://www.breastmilkcounts.com/breastfeeding-basics/how-to-hand-express-breastmilk/) (<https://www.breastmilkcounts.com/breastfeeding-basics/how-to-hand-express-breastmilk/>)

[Lactation Education Resources](https://www.lactationtraining.com/component/edocman/search-result?filter_search=hand%20expression&layout=table&Itemid=0)

(https://www.lactationtraining.com/component/edocman/search-result?filter_search=hand%20expression&layout=table&Itemid=0)

[Hand Expression](https://www.cdc.gov/infant-feeding-emergencies-toolkit/php/hand-expression.html) (<https://www.cdc.gov/infant-feeding-emergencies-toolkit/php/hand-expression.html>)

[The Power of Hand Expression](https://www.lli.org/the-power-of-hand-expression/) (<https://www.lli.org/the-power-of-hand-expression/>)

[Expressing and Pumping Milk](https://wicbreastfeeding.fns.usda.gov/expressing-and-pumping-milk) (<https://wicbreastfeeding.fns.usda.gov/expressing-and-pumping-milk>)

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