

Lactation When You are Separated from Your Baby

Your first days and weeks away from your baby can be very hard. One of the hardest times may be when your milk comes in. Many moms who are separated from their babies have questions about how to cope during this time. We want to help you understand what is going on with your breasts, decide whether you want to keep or stop making milk, and learn how to achieve whichever goal you choose.

What is happening in your breasts?

- During pregnancy, your breasts have been growing and changing to prepare to feed your baby.
- After you give birth, your body goes through more changes to bring in milk. Your body doesn't know that you are separated from your baby and that the milk isn't needed. Hormones will tell your breasts to start making milk.
- For the first few days your breasts make a thick, yellowish substance called colostrum. Colostrum comes in small amounts, so you probably won't feel any discomfort in your breasts at first.
- On the second or third day, your breasts will start to make mature milk, which is whitish and thinner. Some moms may not make mature milk until day 4 or 5.
- When your mature milk comes in, your breasts will begin to feel very full. The pressure from the increasing amount of milk will become uncomfortable.
- When milk is removed from the breast, that tells the breast that the milk is being used and more needs to be made. The more milk is removed, the more the breast will make.

Some mothers who are away from their babies want their breasts to stop making milk as soon as possible. Other mothers want to keep their milk flowing to provide milk to their baby when they are together again. There is no right or wrong way to feel. It is your choice to follow whatever path feels best for you.

You want to stop making milk:

The best way to tell your body to stop making milk is to remove the smallest amount possible. This tells your breasts that the milk is not needed, and they will eventually make less and less milk. But having full breasts can be very uncomfortable. Some things that can help your breasts feel better include:

- Express just enough milk to feel comfortable. See ***How to Hand Express Your Milk*** below
- Wear a comfortable but supportive bra that is not so tight that it reduces blood flow.
- Stand in a hot shower and let the water run over your breasts. Your breasts may release milk while you do this, helping them to feel less full. If you don't have access to a shower, warm water from a sink also works.
- Apply ice packs for 5-15 minutes at a time to help with swelling and pain
- Take a pain reliever like acetaminophen (Tylenol) or ibuprofen (Motrin)

Preventing plugged ducts and infection:

- Plugged ducts are tender and painful lumps in your breast.
- When you express just enough milk to feel comfortable, your milk supply will not increase, and eventually it will go away.
- Expressing a little milk at a time can also help prevent plugged ducts and infections.

You may have an infection if your breast is:

- painful and has reddened areas
- you feel feverish, unwell and/or have the chills

If you experience any of these symptoms, ask to be seen by a medical provider as soon as possible.

Drying up your milk is physically uncomfortable and can make you feel more emotional about being separated from your baby. Be gentle with yourself. Try to do things that make you feel better both physically and emotionally. Take the time that you need to allow the process of drying up your milk to happen at your own pace.

You want to keep making milk:

You may want your body to keep making milk so you can breastfeed when you are with your baby again. The best way to keep your milk is to fully empty your breasts regularly. When you get all the milk out of your breast, your body knows that the milk was needed and that more milk needs to be made. Babies usually empty the breasts by breastfeeding, but while you are away from your baby, you will need to empty your breasts yourself. You can use hand expression to remove the milk from your breasts. See

How to Hand Express Your Milk, below.

Continue to express milk until you are back with your baby, or you decide that you no longer wish to make milk. If you decide that you do not want to keep making milk before you are reunited with your baby, follow the steps above in ***You Want to Stop Making Milk***. This is your body, and you should make whatever decision feels right to you!

How to Hand Express Your Milk:

1. Position your breast above a bowl or sink to catch any milk.
2. Hold your breast in your hand with your fingers making a C shape a few inches away from your areola - the darker part of your breast surrounding your nipple.
3. Push your fingers back toward your heart, then gently squeeze your thumb and fingers together. Try not to slide your fingers over your skin.
4. Continue to press back then squeeze together until milk comes out.
 - If you are trying to dry up your milk:
 - Express only enough milk to make you comfortable. Repeat this process the next time your breasts feel uncomfortably full.
 - If you are trying to keep producing milk:
 - Keep expressing for as long as milk is coming out of your breasts. This can take 15-30 minutes.
 - Move your fingers and thumb to different positions around your areola, always keeping them in the C shape.
 - Try to hand express for an extra 2 minutes after the last drops of milk come out.
 - Repeat this process every 2-3 hours, even at night.
 - Try to empty your breasts 8-10 times per day, and try not to go more than 5-6 hours without emptying your breasts.

Sources:

Breastfeeding and Human Lactation, Sixth Edition Authors: Karen Wambach and Becky Spencer Published by Jones and Bartlett Learning, Burlington MA, 2021 – Information on Weaning found on pages 609-610, Information on Hand Expression found on pages 201-202 and 257-258

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