



Informal Milk Sharing

What You Need to Know

Informal milk sharing has given a growing number of families in our community the opportunity to avoid the use of infant formula while their babies need supplementation. We created this fact sheet to answer some of our clients' questions about the practice of informal milk sharing and to help them make educated infant feeding decisions.

What is informal milk sharing?

Informal milk sharing (also called community milk sharing) refers to donated breastmilk that is provided without the use of a milk bank. Milk sharing has been documented throughout the course of human history, most often in the practice of “wet nursing” (a lactating mother breastfeeding the infant of another).¹

Milk banks, such as the Mother’s Milk Bank at WakeMed in Raleigh, collect, screen, store, and distribute breastmilk throughout the country. Milk from a milk bank is screened for pathogens, heat-treated, frozen, and then distributed for a cost.² Because of the cost associated with banking, milk bank milk is generally reserved for babies with a medical need (such as premature infants whose mothers cannot provide sufficient volume).³

Informal milk sharing, on the other hand, is free because it is simply donated between parents: there is no screening or heat treatment involved.

Why use donor milk instead of infant formula?

There are many reasons you might choose to supplement with donor milk instead of infant formula. In fact, the World Health Organization recommends donor milk over infant formula when a parent’s own milk is not available.⁴ There are numerous reasons for this recommendation, including but not limited to:

- Breastmilk provides the perfect ratio of carbohydrates, fats, and proteins that are more easily digested than those from another animal’s milk. In other words, donor milk may be more easily tolerated by your little one’s developing gastro-intestinal system.
- While infant formula provides adequate nutrition to a growing baby, breastmilk contains many properties that formula simply cannot replicate: hormones for healthy growth, antibodies for immune development, anti-microbial components to stave off infection, prebiotics for healthy gut flora, etc.
- There is some concern over the safety of infant formula. Powdered formulas are not sterile, and in fact have – in rare instances – been associated with serious bacterial infection.⁵ Additionally, infant formula – even in small amounts – can alter the pH of a newborn’s gut, potentially leaving the infant more susceptible to bacterial infection.⁶
- Unlike infant formula, informally donated milk is 100% free!

What are the risks of informal milk sharing?

For all its benefits, informal milk sharing is not without its own set of risks. The major hazards are transmission of pathogens and exposure to drugs and supplements that pass

through milk. ⁷ You can mitigate these risks by selecting a donor you are comfortable with and asking the right questions. For example, you might ask a potential donor:

- **“Have you recently been tested for HIV, Hepatitis B&C, and syphilis?”** While this question may seem “too personal,” accepting another person’s breastmilk is personal too. A potential donor should be willing to answer this question without offense. You are also within your right to ask that they be screened for such conditions before accepting their milk, or offer to pay for their screening if that suits you (see resources, below, for free and low-cost testing facilities).
- **“Do you take any drugs (prescription or over the counter), vitamins, or herbs?”** A number of these pass through breastmilk, and while many are not known to have an adverse affect, it is your right to know what may be in your donor’s milk.
- **“Do you smoke or regularly consume alcohol?”** Both of these components readily pass into breastmilk, as do caffeine and recreational drugs.⁸ You may choose not to accept the milk from someone whose milk may contain these contaminants, even if they are not regular users.

Additional safety precautions:

- We advise against paying for informally shared milk, with the exception of any related shipping or travel costs.
- If you are searching for a donor on the internet, we recommend limiting your search to resources that specifically deal in informal breastmilk donations (see resource list below). We do not recommend accepting breastmilk found on Craigslist or similar internet classifieds pages.
- Always follow proper storage and thawing guidelines for breastmilk. See Medela’s handout, *Breastmilk Collection and Storage*, attached.

How do I find donor milk?

While we do not act as “brokers” for informally donated milk, we do keep a list of current donors in our area. We can help you get in contact with these donors, or you may find for a donor by searching one of the resources listed below.

Peaceful Beginnings offers one-on-one lactation consultation and individualized plans of care to help you meet your breastfeeding goals. We pride ourselves on being one of the Triad’s only out-of-hospital resources for breastfeeding support provided by International Board Certified Lactation Consultants (IBCLCs). This allows us to provide the clinical judgment of a lactation consultant while maintaining a small enough client load to give you personalized continuity of care. Office and home visits are available. Call us to schedule an appointment:

Linda Donovan, RN, MHA, IBCLC
336-255-8311
Linda@peaceful-beginnings.org

Lauren Guy, IBCLC, RLC
336-207-0826
Lauren@peaceful-beginnings.org

<http://www.peaceful-beginnings.org>

Additional Resources

Informal Milk Sharing

Human Milk for Human Babies: <http://www.hm4hb.net>

Eats on Feets: <http://www.eatsonfeets.org>

Find a donor locally: Triad NL/AP board on Facebook

Breastfeeding Information and Support

La Leche League International: <http://www.llli.org>

Breastfeeding Inc.: <http://www.breastfeedinginc.ca>

Kelly Mom: <http://www.kellymom.com>

HIV, Hepatitis, and Syphilis Screening

Guilford County Health Departments: 336-641-5563 (Greensboro)
336-845-7699 (High Point)

Triad Health Project: 336-275-1654 (Greensboro)
336-884-4116 (High Point)

¹ Sharon Knorr, *Milk Sharing – Formal and Informal*, Breastfeeding USA, <https://breastfeedingusa.org/content/article/milk-sharing%E2%80%94formal-and-informal> (May 24, 2013).

² WakeMed Mother’s Milk Bank, *How Does a Donor Milk Bank Operate?*, <http://www.wakemed.org/body.cfm?id=1229> (May 24, 2013).

³ Akre *et al*: “Milk sharing: from private practice to public pursuit,” *International Breastfeeding Journal* 2011 6:8.

⁴ World Health Organization, *Infant and Young Child Nutrition*, http://apps.who.int/gb/archive/pdf_files/WHA55/ea5515.pdf (May 24, 2013).

⁵ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Cronobacter Illness and Infant Formula*, <http://www.cdc.gov/features/cronobacter/> (June 3, 2013).

⁶ PhD in Parenting, *Risks of Informal Breastmilk Sharing Versus Formula Feeding*, <http://www.phdinparenting.com/blog/2010/11/28/risks-of-informal-breastmilk-sharing-versus-formula-feeding.html> (June 6, 2013).

⁷ <http://www.phdinparenting.com/blog/2010/11/28/risks-of-informal-breastmilk-sharing-versus-formula-feeding.html>

⁸ Liston, J: “Breastfeeding and the use of recreational drugs – alcohol, caffeine, nicotine and marijuana,” *Breastfeeding Review* 1998 6:2.
