

Breast care when your baby has died

Grief from the death of a baby is one of the most difficult things for a parent to deal with. It is a time of deep sadness and can be emotionally and physically exhausting.

This brochure will discuss some choices for how you manage your breasts and milk production after the death of your baby and, if you want, how to donate milk to the Australian Red Cross Blood Service Milk Bank to help vulnerable babies.

We strongly recommend discussing these choices with your family, as well as your doctor, midwife, lactation consultant and/or social worker.

Colostrum (early breast milk) is produced as early as 16 weeks into the pregnancy. Even when your baby has died, your breasts will make milk. Some women welcome this as proof their baby was real while other women find the reminder painful.

Caring for your breasts is important. Good breast care after a loss will help make your breasts more comfortable and reduce the risk of blocked milk ducts and mastitis (inflammation of the breast tissue).

A medication (Dostinex - cabergoline) can be used to suppress breast milk production if taken in the first 24 hours after birth. Your doctor can discuss this with you.

It is not recommended to restrict fluids, or bind your breasts with a tight bra as it increases the risk of blocked milk ducts and mastitis.

If your breasts become uncomfortable

- Consider wearing a comfortable, supportive bra with breast pads, day and night.
- Apply wrapped cold packs (gel packs or a bag of frozen peas) or icy chilled washers directly on your breasts. Cold packs need to be changed frequently so at least 3 packs will be needed.
- Avoid heat on your breasts, for example hot showers or heat packs.
- Take mild pain relief as directed to relieve pain and discomfort.

- Express enough milk to relieve fullness and keep breasts comfortable. This will not increase your milk supply because you are not emptying your breasts.

It may be necessary to continue expressing to relieve fullness for several days. Expressing will help prevent the pain of sudden engorgement or mastitis.

What should I do?

The choice of how to manage your lactation and deciding whether to donate your milk is a personal decision. You should do whatever you feel will help you during this very sad time. Mothers have different feelings about what is the best choice for them. It is important that you prioritise you and your family's wellbeing when making your decision.

Stopping your milk supply when supply is established and your baby dies

Over several days gradually decrease the number of times you express and the amount of milk removed from your breasts. The volume removed should keep your breasts comfortable. Keeping your breasts comfortable is important for mothers who have been expressing with a pump for more than two weeks. Depending on your circumstances, the decrease in expressing can take place either in hospital or at home.

If you are unsure about your particular situation seek the guidance of a healthcare professional or an Australian Breastfeeding Association counsellor.

Things to watch for

Engorgement

Breasts become swollen, hard and painful. If this happens express your breasts completely once to relieve the pain. Over the next several days express enough milk to keep your breasts comfortable, apply wrapped cold packs, avoid heat and take mild pain relief (consult with your doctor) to increase comfort.

Mastitis

Mastitis is an inflammation of the breast tissue that can lead to infection. Tender red breast lumps that you can't massage out, temperatures, or flu like symptoms may indicate you have mastitis. If these symptoms occur seek medical advice as soon as possible.

How long will I make milk?

After your baby dies, your body will take 2-3 weeks to stop producing breast milk. Breast milk leakage may continue for some time after the discomfort has settled. If you continue to express, milk production will continue until you decide to stop.

Memento

Some mothers may like to freeze a small amount of breast milk as a memento.

Donation to the Milk Bank

Mothers choose to donate their breast milk for different reasons. For some mothers, their breast milk is the evidence of having had a baby and an acknowledgement of motherhood. Some mothers donate because they wanted to share their baby's milk with other babies in need. Other mothers donate because it can be upsetting to discard their baby's milk. For these reasons, some mothers find milk donation can be helpful at this time of grief.

What happens if I choose to express and donate my milk?

Expressed breast milk can be donated to the Milk Bank. Becoming a milk donor involves a screening process similar to donating blood. This includes an interview, a written questionnaire and blood testing. When you start the process please be sure to indicate that you have experienced the death of your baby. If you are approved to donate, the Milk Bank will waive the minimum donation amount for you, and gratefully accept any amount of breast milk you are able to provide. Find out more about donating at milkbank.com.au. You can also ask your nurse, midwife or lactation consultant or call 1300 459 040.

The day of the funeral

This will be a long and emotional day. These suggestions may help:

- Express milk for comfort before the funeral and during the day as needed.
- Your breasts may leak milk. Wear breast pads under your bra and take some spares and a bag to carry wet breast pads.
- Wear your bra comfortably firm but NOT tight.
- Dark-coloured or patterned tops are less likely to show wet patches.
- A cardigan or jacket may help hide wet spots.
- Paracetamol taken as directed will help ease breast pain.

After the loss of your precious baby, feelings of grief and sadness may come and go as you try to move on with your life. Family and friends will want to show they care even though they may not understand exactly how you feel. Your Maternity or Neonatal Unit's Social Worker can advise on practical issues, such as funeral arrangements, and also provide support and counselling for families whose baby has died. It may be helpful to speak with others who have lost a child (e.g. Red Nose Grief and Loss) or you may wish to contact a grief counsellor or counselling service (e.g. NALAG - National Association for Loss and Grief).

Contacts

Australian Breastfeeding Association Helpline

Phone 1800 686 268, (i.e. 1800 mum 2 mum)
www.breastfeeding.asn.au

Milk Bank

www.milkbank.com.au
1300 459 040
milkbank@redcrossblood.org.au

NALAG (National Association for Loss and Grief)

www.nalag.org.au

Red Nose Grief and Loss

Phone 1300 308 307
www.rednosegriefandloss.com.au

SANDS (Stillbirth and Neonatal Death Support)

Phone 1300 072 637
www.sands.org.au