

Supplementing

Some families may need to supplement their breastfed or chestfed baby for medical reasons, while others may choose to supplement for personal reasons. If you use infant formula to feed your baby, it is important to have the information you need to feel comfortable with your plan and feed your baby safely.

What is supplementing?

Giving your baby your own expressed milk, donated human milk or baby formula, in addition to breastfeeding or chestfeeding.

Supplementing Options

Recommended supplements in order of what to try first, if available:

1st choice: Your own milk, freshly hand-expressed or pumped

2nd choice: Your own frozen milk, thawed just before using

3rd choice: Pasteurized donor milk from a certified human milk bank

4th choice: Store-bought infant formula that is cow's milk-based (see [Formula Feeding](#))

Your own milk is best

Your own milk – fresh or frozen (when fresh isn't available) – is the best way to feed your baby.

If you need to give your baby something other than your own milk

Option 1 – Pasteurized donor human milk from a certified human milk bank

Because certified milk banks have a small supply of milk, it's usually only given by prescription to premature, very ill or high-risk babies.

What is pasteurized donor human milk?

Human milk that has been donated to a certified human milk bank. Donors are carefully screened to make sure they're healthy and their milk is safe. The milk is pasteurized to kill harmful bacteria and viruses.



BE AWARE

To help ensure your baby grows well and stays healthy, always follow the directions on the label when making and storing formula.

Option 2 – Store-bought infant formula

If you're not able to get milk from a certified human milk bank, the next best choice is cow's milk-based store-bought infant formula. This can provide your baby with complete nutrition. Formula is available in 3 types: ready-to-feed liquid, concentrated liquid and powdered. Healthy babies born at full term (37 weeks or more of pregnancy), can be fed any type of store-bought formula.

If your baby was born premature (before 37 weeks of pregnancy) and is under 2 months of age (corrected age), or had a low birth weight (less than 2500 grams at birth), or has a weakened immune system, use liquid formula – either ready-to-feed or concentrate – as powdered formula is not sterile and may not be the best choice for young babies who are at higher risk of getting sick. Ready-to-feed and concentrated liquid formulas are sterile until they are opened. Specialized formulas should only be used if recommended by your health care provider. Discuss options with your health care provider to determine the best choice for your baby.

Before Supplementing

Talk with your health care provider before giving your baby anything other than your own milk. This will help you get all the information you need to feed them safely.

Supplementing with other milk or formula when it's not needed can decrease your milk supply, cause engorgement (see [Breastfeeding or Chestfeeding Challenges You May Face](#)) and make breastfeeding or chestfeeding more difficult. It can also affect your baby's health.

But sometimes it's medically necessary to supplement to give your baby more food and energy. The most important thing is that your baby gets enough food and that they're fed safely – whether with human milk, formula or both. Talk with your health care provider if you have concerns about giving your baby formula.

If you supplement:

- Give your baby as much of your own milk as you can.
- Get support from your health care provider or a lactation consultant to keep up your own milk supply. This may allow you to return fully to breastfeeding or chestfeeding in the future.
- Use a spoon or a small cup without a lid, not a bottle. Or use a specialized feeding device if recommended by your health care professional.



KEY TAKEAWAY

If you're thinking about supplementing, make sure you have all the information you need to make an informed decision. Talk it over with your health care provider or public health nurse or call HealthLink BC at 8-1-1 for advice.



DID YOU KNOW?

In-home heat treatment of human milk ("flash heating") has not been proven to remove dangerous bacteria and viruses that could make your baby sick.

Thinking About Sharing Milk with Other Parents and Caregivers?

What is informal ("peer-to-peer") human milk sharing?

Sharing unscreened, unpasteurized human milk with friends, family members or through local or online milk-sharing groups.

Parents and caregivers who want to give their baby human milk but aren't able to provide enough themselves sometimes consider informal milk sharing. But before giving your baby milk from an informal donor, talk with your health care provider about the risks and benefits.

What are the risks?

Because milk shared informally isn't screened or pasteurized, it may carry risks:

- Viruses such as HIV and Hepatitis B and C can be passed to your baby. Donors may not even know that they carry certain viruses and bacteria.
- If donors smoke, drink alcohol, use cannabis, or take prescription or over-the-counter medications, herbal supplements or non-prescription opioids and stimulants, harmful substances can pass into the milk and hurt your baby (see [Caffeine](#), [Smoking](#), [Alcohol](#), [Other Substances and Breastfeeding or Chestfeeding](#)).
- If the milk isn't collected, stored and transported safely, bacteria can grow and make your baby sick.
- Unscreened donor milk may be mixed with water, cow's milk or something else that you don't know about.



DID YOU KNOW?

You can donate your extra milk to the BC Women's Provincial Milk Bank. If you have extra milk you'd like to donate, talk with your health care provider, visit bcwomensmilkbank.ca or call 604-875-3743.

Lowering the risks

If you're considering informal milk sharing, lower the risk by:

- not buying milk online
- only using the milk of a close family member or friend
- finding out all you can about your donor's health and lifestyle
- ensuring that the donor has recently tested negative for Hepatitis B and C, human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), human T-lymphotropic virus (HTLV) and syphilis, and that they aren't at ongoing risk for exposure
- confirming that the donor doesn't smoke, drink alcohol, or use cannabis or non-prescription opioids or stimulants
- ensuring that the donor doesn't take any medications or supplements, including herbs
- checking that the donor is in good overall health and not using their milk when they're sick
- limiting the number of donors you use
- having ongoing, face-to-face contact with your donor
- ensuring that the milk is handled, stored and sent to you as safely as possible



BE AWARE

Health Canada, the Canadian Paediatric Society and the Human Milk Banking Association of North America do not recommend sharing human milk with friends, family or milk-sharing groups. Milk shared informally is not tested or pasteurized to kill harmful bacteria and viruses.