

# Lactation After Loss: A Guide for Grieving Mothers

---

One of the most challenging times for many grieving mothers is when their milk comes in. Many feel unprepared to cope during this physically and emotionally difficult time.

There are different options to help your body and your emotions through this experience. Some mothers find the presence of milk to be upsetting and they want to make it go away as quickly as possible. Others find the milk to be a comforting reminder of their body's ability to care for their baby. For some mothers, it can be very healing to pump their milk and donate it to a donor human milk bank to be given to sick or premature babies.

There is no right or wrong way to feel and the grief can be overwhelming. Take the time you need to allow the weaning process to happen at a rate that brings you the most physical and emotional comfort.

## **What can I expect after I deliver my baby?**

During your pregnancy, your breasts were preparing to make milk to feed your baby. After delivery, hormones trigger your body to start making milk. For the first few days, you will notice the initial milk called colostrum which is thick and yellow. A few days after delivery, your mature milk will start to come in which is much more abundant.

## **How will my breasts feel?**

Colostrum is very minimal so there will be minimal discomfort during the first few days. As the milk starts to come in, some mothers experience only slight fullness, while others find their breasts become hard with tightly stretched skin

that may appear shiny or feel warm. Engorgement can also extend up into the armpit and out to the end of the nipple. Many mothers experience increased tenderness or throbbing and some develop a low grade fever (between 100- 101 degrees Fahrenheit).

### **What are some things I can do to help my body stop making milk?**

Your body will produce milk in response to the amount of milk being removed. The goal is to decrease your milk supply gradually to avoid discomfort and complications like plugged ducts or infection in the breasts.

For the first few days after delivery, do not use a breast pump unless you are considering milk donation. If your milk is in and you have been feeding your baby at the breast or pumping regularly, it is important to decrease your milk supply gradually. Sudden weaning can cause breast engorgement, plugged ducts or infection in the breasts.

### **My milk supply is already well established. How can I gradually decrease my milk supply?**

Use a double electric breast pump to continue removing milk but adjust your pumping schedule slowly in order to stop your milk production gradually. For example, if you have been feeding your baby at the breast or pumping 8 times in 24 hours, reduce that to 7 times in the next 24 hours. Continue reducing your pumping schedule to 6 times, and then to 5 times, and then to 4 times in 24 hours. After that, pump just long enough to relieve discomfort as needed for the next few days. It may take a week or more, but your body will eventually stop producing milk as you stop removing it.

## **What are some things I can do to help relieve the pain and pressure of engorgement after delivery?**

- Try wearing a well-fitting, supportive bra but do not bind your breasts.
- Use cold packs on your breasts for 20 minutes at a time with a layer of fabric between the skin and the cold pack.
- Wrap each breast in washed, cold, raw cabbage leaves. Change leaves when they become warm and wilted.
- Avoid using heat for comfort as heat can increase swelling and inflammation which can lead to more discomfort.
- As your milk starts to come in, pump just enough milk by hand or with a breast pump to make you feel more comfortable. Do not completely empty your breasts.

## **Can I take any medication for the engorgement pain?**

Acetaminophen or Ibuprofen can be taken as directed for discomfort.

## **I would like to donate milk. How do I begin the process?**

Some mothers find it very healing to pump their breast milk and donate it to another baby in need. If you have been pumping for your baby, it can be extremely difficult to consider discarding your milk. Donating your milk to a human milk bank can be lifesaving for premature and very ill babies.

If milk donation is something you are considering, it will be important to start using a breast pump as soon as possible after delivery. Removing milk from the breasts **thoroughly** and **frequently** is critically important to establish and maintain a milk supply. It is recommended to pump at least every 3 hours for 15 minutes at a time.

The Human Milk Banking Association of North America (HMBANA) is a nonprofit organization that was established to ensure the quality of donor

human milk. Bronson Mothers' Milk Bank in Kalamazoo is the only HMBANA accredited milk bank in Michigan. There is a screening process involved before becoming a milk donor. Please contact the Bronson Mothers' Milk Bank at (269) 341-6146 for more information.

### **When should I call my health care provider?**

- For general questions, please call the Lactation Help Line at (844) 200-8894. You will be asked to leave a message and a lactation consultant will return your call within 24 hours.
- If you notice signs of infection, including fever, redness or swelling, contact your health care provider.
  - If you delivered your baby within the past 6 weeks, you can call Triage at (734) 764-8134.

Disclaimer: This document contains information and/or instructional materials developed by the University of Michigan Health System (UMHS) for the typical patient with your condition. It may include links to online content that was not created by UMHS and for which UMHS does not assume responsibility. It does not replace medical advice from your health care provider because your experience may differ from that of the typical patient. Talk to your health care provider if you have any questions about this document, your condition or your treatment plan.

Patient Education by [University of Michigan Health System](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License](#). Last Revised 07/2016