

Lactation After Loss: A Guide for Grieving Parents

The goal of our education materials is to provide medically accurate information that is inclusive of all parents and families. We invite you to have a conversation with your provider about the vocabulary and language that is most comfortable for you.

One of the most challenging times for many grieving parents 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 parents feel upset by the presence of milk 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 parents, it can be very healing to pump their milk and donate it to a donor human milk bank to help sick or premature babies.

There is no right or wrong way to feel. Take the time you need to transition through the phases of making milk in a way that brings you the most physical and emotional comfort.

What can I expect after my pregnancy has ended?

During your pregnancy, your breasts were preparing to make milk to feed your baby. When your pregnancy ends, hormones cause your body to start making milk. For the first few days, you will notice the first milk that comes in, called **colostrum**, which is thick and yellow. A few days later, your mature milk will start to come in, and your body will make larger amounts of this milk.

How will my breasts feel?

Your body only makes a small amount of colostrum, so there will be very little discomfort during the first few days. As the milk starts to come in, some parents experience only a small feeling of fullness, while others find their breasts become hard with tightly stretched skin that may look shiny or feel warm. This is called **engorgement**, and it can extend up into the armpit and out to the end of the nipple. Many parents feel increased tenderness or throbbing around their breasts, and some develop a low fever (between 100-101° F).

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

- For the first few days after your pregnancy has ended, do not use a breast pump (unless you are thinking about donating your milk).
- Your body makes milk in response to the amount of milk that's removed from your body. To help your body stop making milk, you'll need to slowly decrease your milk supply. This is called **gradual weaning**, which will help you avoid discomfort and complications like plugged ducts or infection in the breasts.

If I already have a regular milk supply, how can I slowly decrease my milk supply?

Use a double electric breast pump to continue removing milk, but change your pumping schedule slowly. For example, if you have been breastfeeding or chestfeeding your baby or pumping 8 times in 24 hours, reduce that to pumping 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 every 24 hours. After that, pump just long enough to reduce 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?

- 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 (make sure there's a layer of fabric between your skin and the cold pack).
- Avoid using heat (like heating pads, etc.). Heat can increase swelling and inflammation in your breasts, 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?

You can take acetaminophen (Tylenol®) or ibuprofen (Motrin® or Advil®). Follow the instructions on the bottle or medication package.

I would like to donate milk. How do I start the process?

Some parents find it very healing to pump their breast milk and donate it to another baby in need. Donating your milk to a human milk bank can be lifesaving for premature and very ill babies.

If you are thinking about donating your milk, start using a breast pump as soon as possible after your pregnancy ends. Removing milk from the breasts **thoroughly** and **frequently** is very important to create and keep up your milk supply. We recommend you pump at least every 3 hours for 15 minutes at a time if you want to continue producing milk.

The Human Milk Banking Association of North America (HMBANA) is a nonprofit organization created to ensure the quality of donor human milk. There is a screening process involved before becoming a milk donor. There are

2 HMBANA-accredited milk banks in Michigan. Please contact the location of your choice for more information:

- Bronson Mothers' Milk Bank in Kalamazoo, MI: (269) 341-6146
- Henry Ford Milk Bank in Jackson, MI: (517) 205-6455

When should I call my healthcare provider?

- For general questions, please call the Lactation Help Line at (844) 200-8894. They will ask you 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 healthcare provider.
 - If you delivered your baby within the past 6 weeks, you can call Birth Center Triage at (734) 764-8134.

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