

Is it Safe to Provide Milk for My NICU Baby if I Have or Have Been Exposed to Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)?

With so much news in the media about COVID-19, it is natural to be concerned about whether providing milk for your NICU baby is safe or even advisable.

This is especially true if you think you have been exposed to or diagnosed with COVID-19. However, ***your milk is not only safe, but beneficial for your NICU baby.***

Does COVID-19 get into my milk?

- We do not know for sure whether mothers with COVID-19 pass the virus into their milk. The very few studies on this topic did not find COVID-19 in mother's milk. Studies of mothers who had a similar virus (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome; SARS-CoV) did not find the SARS virus in the mother's milk.
- However, any virus that makes its way into the mother's blood stream causes the mother to make very specific types of protection, called antibodies, that fight these same viruses. These antibodies pass into the mother's milk. So, in the unlikely event that the virus is transferred in the milk, ***so are the antibodies that even the most modern medicines cannot provide.***

Wouldn't it just be best for my baby to have formula or donor milk?

- It is easy to think that it is "on the safe side" to avoid providing your milk, but the opposite is true. Only your milk — not formula or donor milk — has the

one-of-a-kind antibodies to lower the chances that your baby becomes sick with COVID-19.

- All authorities (World Health Organization, Centers for Disease Control, American Academy of Pediatrics, Academy of Breastfeeding Medicine) recommend that breastfeeding (milk provision) should continue in the presence of COVID-19. In the NICU, mother's milk is even more important because it helps the baby's immature immune system fight all types of infections.

What if my baby needs donor milk? Can I be sure that it does not have COVID-19?

This is a very normal concern. However, the milk banks that provide donor milk to our NICU have many steps to assure the milk is safe.

- First, donor mothers must have a blood test to show they do not have an illness. Only after passing this test, do these mothers send a sample of their milk to the milk bank. If the milk has harmful germs, the mother cannot be a milk donor.
- Finally, all accepted donor milk is pasteurized — just like milk you buy in the store for your family. This heat-treatment kills germs in the milk, including viruses like COVID-19.

What else can I do to lower the chances my baby is exposed to COVID-19 while providing my milk?

Remember that all germs, including COVID-19, can get into pumped milk, even if they do not start off in the breast itself. Here are several precautions you can take.

- **Wash your hands with warm, soapy water or an alcohol hand sanitizer before you start to pump or handle milk collection equipment.** Germs from your hands can get into the pumped milk even if they are not in the milk beforehand.
- **Make sure your breast pump collection kit is as clean as possible.** Wash your collection kit with warm, soapy water after each use, then rinse it with clear water, then air-dry it away from other dishes or where family members might touch the pieces. Sanitize your kit at least once daily with a microwave steam bag, by boiling in a pot on the stove, or in the dishwasher (Sani-cycle).
- **Avoid coughing or sneezing on the breast pump collection kit and the milk storage containers.** This tip is especially important because COVID-19 is spread by coughing, sneezing and breathing.
- **Cleanse the outside of the breast pump before you use it.** Whether in your home or in the NICU, use a germ-killing wipe on the outside of the pump each time you use it.

