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.

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Does COVID-19 get into my milk? This is especially true if you think you have been exposed to or diagnosed with COVID-19. However, any virus that makes its way into the mother’s blood stream causes the mother to make one-of-a-kind antibodies to lower the chances that her baby will get the virus. These antibodies pass into the mother’s milk. Studies of mothers who had a similar illness did not find COVID-19 in their mother’s milk. However, any virus that makes its way into the mother’s milk is transferred in the milk, so are the antibodies that even the most modern medicines cannot make. These antibodies pass into the mother’s milk and into her baby’s body to fight these same viruses. These antibodies are very specific types of protection, called antibodies, that provide donor milk to our NICU have many steps to assure the milk is safe. In the NICU, mother’s milk — not formula or donor milk — has the very best protection for your NICU baby. The general information sheets provided by Rush University Medical Center are for parents and interested private persons without medical education and we do not raise any claim to completeness of the information sheets. Under no circumstances should this information be regarded as a substitute for professional advice or treatment or for any independent medical judgment of a healthcare professional regarding specific patient diagnoses or treatment plans. Healthcare providers should exercise their own independent medical judgment, and decisions as to any diagnosis or treatment plan are the sole responsibility of such healthcare provider. The general content of this information sheet cannot and shall not be used to make independent diagnoses or begin treatment. Our information is not personally related to you. We therefore recommend that you visit recognised healthcare professionals to get specific advice for any medical problems.

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This is a very normal concern. However, the milk banks did not find the SARS virus in the mother’s milk. Studies of mothers who had a similar illness did not find COVID-19 in their mother’s milk. This is primarily for training purposes and for additional information to be given to parents or private persons without medical education by NICU health professionals. The general information sheets provided by Rush University Medical Center are for parents and interested private persons without medical education and we do not raise any claim to completeness of the information sheets. Under no circumstances should this information be regarded as a substitute for professional advice or treatment or for any independent medical judgment of a healthcare professional regarding specific patient diagnoses or treatment plans. Healthcare providers should exercise their own independent medical judgment, and decisions as to any diagnosis or treatment plan are the sole responsibility of such healthcare provider. The general content of this information sheet cannot and shall not be used to make independent diagnoses or begin treatment. Our information is not personally related to you. We therefore recommend that you visit recognised healthcare professionals to get specific advice for any medical problems.

This information sheet was published on www.LactaHub.org on 4 August 2020. It is provided in good faith. We will be happy to provide you with further information and guidance.

We look forward to your inquiry at: contact@lactahub.org