

Lactation after Loss

In the United States, perinatal and infant mortality result in more than 1 million lost lives annually. As we strive to reduce infant loss, we must also stand alongside families who endure the unimaginable.

Research suggests that while most birthing parents who endure the death of an infant will experience the onset of lactation,⁴ healthcare providers are often not equipped to provide ongoing lactation support and resources.⁵ This can compound trauma, resulting in additional distress for parents.⁶

Bereaved parents deserve to make informed lactation decisions to support their unique physiological and psychological needs. Unfortunately, many parents experiencing loss may be quickly discharged and emotionally unable to process lactation-related information while still in the hospital setting.

To help aid in the initiation and continuation of these necessary conversations, providers should offer evidenced-based resources that target lactation care after loss and include:



- Anticipatory guidance regarding the production of milk after a loss⁷
- Acknowledgement of emotional responses to lactation after loss⁹
- Reduced chances of poor health outcomes associated with mismanaged lactation⁴
- Information about a range of lactation options⁹



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Within the tragic circumstances of infant death, a mother's health and comfort must not be overlooked. Losing an infant any time after 16 weeks' gestation⁷ may still lead to lactation (Lactogenesis I). A drop in pregnancy hormones (Lactogenesis II) triggers the onset of copious milk secretion. Without some form of milk expression, breasts may experience fullness and pressure, causing significant discomfort. Abrupt cessation of lactation may lead to severe engorgement, pain, and possibly mastitis.⁷

The intersection of physical, emotional, and cultural qualities confers human milk with complex meaning. While some bereaved mothers and birth parents find lactating upsetting, for others it is a visible manifestation of motherhood that provides a comforting reminder of their baby.

There is no right or wrong way to feel or grieve. Providing mothers with a full range of choices – expression, donation, and suppression – can be empowering when many other aspects of her life feel out of control. Much like the options regarding autopsy, funeral services, photos, and mementos of the infant, providers must not forget to allow mothers to choose what is best for them regarding lactation.¹⁴

Milk Donation while Grieving

Expressing and donating human milk may provide an important protective factor to the bereaved birth parent, as well as aid in psychological healing.¹⁵

Research indicates that milk expression may decrease the risk of post-partum depression.²³ This is in part due to the beneficial hormones stimulated through lactation. In this way, milk donation can help regulate the body's biochemical response to the loss, which can help prevent "complicated grief"²⁴ and the potentially disastrous consequences of post-partum depression.

The healing value of milk donation varies with each unique grief journey. Whether a mother has access to experiences that can facilitate finding a higher purpose or positive aftereffect from her baby's life may predict the extent to which she can effectively move through the grieving process.¹⁶ Bereaved mothers reported pumping and donating milk provided an expression and affirmation of motherhood.¹⁵ Others indicated that pumping milk provided a physical connection to their baby and a way to reconstruct or enhance the bond. Finally, milk donations share the "emotional and moral logic" of organ donation where families of lost loved ones choose to give life to others. Thus, bereaved milk donors shared the deep meaning of potentially saving another infant's life to create a legacy for their baby.¹²

The Milk Bank Services

Comprehensive bereavement services are designed to provide informed consent as well as support at the moment of need. The Milk Bank hopes to provide a safe place for families to share stories of their pregnancy, their child's life, and their loss with the intention of finding meaning.

Partner healthcare providers can access the following complimentary services directly or through referrals for their patients.

- Bereavement Lactation Kits
- Bereavement Donation Literature
- Lactation after Loss clinical education
- Grand Rounds presentations
- Mind, Body, Wellness Group for Bereaved Families
- Pump Loaner Program
- Milk Donation & Legacy Memorial Wall

Human Milk Saves Lives

Human Milk can provide benefits for ²¹ :	Human Milk can reduce the risk of:
• Necrotizing enterocolitis** • Hypoglycemia • Hyperbilirubinemia • Cardiac Conditions • Neonatal abstinence syndrome • GI/Feeding Intolerance • Dermatitis • Gastroenteritis • Lower respiratory infections • Shortened NICU stays	• Celiac disease • Ear infections • Asthma • Inflammatory bowel disease • Childhood type 1 diabetes • Type 2 diabetes • Childhood leukemia and lymphoma • Sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS)

**The use of only human milk to feed preterm and low birthweight infants reduces Necrotizing Enterocolitis by 77%.²⁵

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