

Why Donor Human Milk is an Essential Need During COVID-19

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This is a difficult time, and like so many other organizations, businesses, and individuals, the Human Milk Banking Association of North America (HMBANA) is quickly gaining information and guidance for COVID-19.

HMBANA is working closely with the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and Centers for Disease Control (CDC) to optimize safety and to work diligently to ensure no interruption in the supply of safe donor human milk.

Milk banks provide an essential service. They continue working through the pandemic and understand that the highest priority action is to increase donor screening and pasteurization activities to ensure that fragile babies have access to life-saving milk. With the knowledge that the peak of this pandemic is still weeks or months away, it is paramount to procure and process milk as rapidly as possible to safeguard our supply.

Babies continue to be born throughout the pandemic of COVID-19. Hospitals strive to keep families safe, limiting visitors and sending mothers home as soon as possible. Lactation support services in and out of hospitals creatively incorporate virtual support for lactating mothers and are to be applauded for their commitment to support the CDC's statements encouraging breastfeeding during COVID-19.

See CDC's information for breastfeeding moms during COVID-19 [here](#).

Preterm and other medically fragile babies make up nearly 72,000 of the annual births in the US. For them, human milk feedings are imperative, a potential life and death situation. Research shows definitively that human milk feedings decrease rates of necrotizing enterocolitis (NEC) in the very low birth weight infants by 75%. Fewer than half of these babies' mothers can provide them with breastmilk. Stress, physical separation, grief, and other factors act negatively on the ability to provide a full milk supply. Additional factors related to COVID-19 include "shelter in place" rules, school closures, and limited visiting hours, amid others.

Nonprofit milk banking exists to fill the gaps in available human milk for fragile babies. Since 1985, standards for the milk bank industry created by HMBANA, in consultation with the FDA and CDC, have ensured a safe milk supply across Canada and the US. This has not changed during the current pandemic.

The CDC guidance to continue breastfeeding is important. Breast milk delivers antibodies that may be protective against the virus, and **the coronavirus has not been found in human milk**. Milk banks acknowledge that this is a new virus and follow the considerations suggested by the FDA for blood banks' screening of donors.

Also, COVID-19 is transmitted person-to-person, and the FDA has declared that food and food packaging are not vectors. This is very good news.

Research is underway to prove that COVID-19, just in case it can be found in breast milk, is eradicated by Holder Pasteurization, the heat processing method used by HMBANA-accredited nonprofit milk banks.



In the meantime, it is known that all past corona viruses were heat sensitive and destroyed by this pasteurization process. There is no reason to believe that COVID-19 is different.

Research is also under way to show mothers may develop antibodies to the virus, adding to the protective benefits of human milk and further supporting their need to continue breastfeeding.

Donor human milk has been saving lives in hospitals since 1985 with positive outcomes. This is a carefully regulated, evidence-based industry that is credited with vastly diminishing the often-fatal experience of NEC, as well as sepsis and other complications of prematurity. Milk bank staff are working throughout this pandemic to ensure continuance of a safe supply of donor human milk, and we applaud the milk donors who make it all possible.

Thanks to [Mothers' Milk Bank at Austin](#) for the original research and content used in this document.