GUIDE FOR PARENTS

The right way to store breast milk

If you are pumping your breasts and feeding your baby breast milk at a later time, you must follow certain guidelines on storing the milk. The following Q&As address some commonly asked questions.

What type of bag or container should I use to freeze breast milk?

Many women use disposable bottle bags (made of polyethylene). Cheaper, generic bottle bags are fine to use, too. They come in a tear-off roll and can be purchased at your local pharmacy. Brand name bags (such as Medela and Playtex), sold specifically for breast milk storage, work well but are more expensive and sometimes harder to find.

When using disposable bags, double-bag the milk to eliminate the risk of contamination from nicks: Fill the bag with breast milk, tie off the top with a freezer tie, and then place that bag in a larger storage bag (like a zipper-lock bag) along with other bags of frozen milk.

A hard-sided storage container is best for storing breast milk. Options include glass (clear or brown), clear hard plastic (polycarbonate), and frosted hard plastic (polypropylene). These containers are more expensive than disposable bags and take up more room in the freezer.

How much should I freeze?

Freeze breast milk in small amounts—2 to 4 ounces. These small volumes thaw faster than large amounts, and less is wasted if your baby is unable to finish all the milk.

When filling any container with the breast milk that is to be frozen, leave a little space at the top. Breast milk, like most other liquids, expands when it freezes. Do not add fresh, warm milk to already frozen milk. This defrosts the previously frozen milk.

How will I know if the freezer is cold enough?

If the temperature is cold enough to freeze ice cream then it is cold enough to freeze breast milk. Choose the coldest location in the freezer to store breast milk; the back of the freezer is colder than space near the front or in the door.

Label the bag or container with the collection date and the volume. Also, write your baby’s name if a daycare provider or other caregiver will be preparing feedings for the baby. Place the newest milk in the back of the pile in the freezer and move older milk to the front.

How long can I store the milk?

That depends on where the milk is stored. The table below lists the different times by storage location. These guidelines apply to milk for healthy infants only.1-5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Storage location of breast milk</th>
<th>Temperature</th>
<th>Storage time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>At room temperature</td>
<td>77° F/25° C</td>
<td>4 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooler with blue ice</td>
<td>59° F/15° C</td>
<td>24 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refrigerator (fresh milk)</td>
<td>39° F/4° C</td>
<td>72 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refrigerator (previously thawed milk)</td>
<td>39° F/4° C</td>
<td>24 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frozen milk1</td>
<td>4° F/-20° C</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freezer inside refrigerator area</td>
<td></td>
<td>2 weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freezer with separate door</td>
<td></td>
<td>3-6 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>outside refrigerator</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separate manual-defrost deep freeze</td>
<td></td>
<td>6-12 months</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Do not refreeze thawed milk.
1 Container with lid with airtight seal.

How should I defrost frozen milk?

You can move it from the freezer to the refrigerator, in which case it will thaw in 12 hours. Or, you can place it on the counter at room temperature. Placing it in a container of tepid water or running it under warm tap water will speed up the thawing process and also warm it up. Do not microwave the milk!

The fat in breast milk rises to the top so it may appear layered after it defrosts. Swirl the milk to mix it before feeding. Breast milk may acquire a tinge of color depending on the mother’s diet, but it remains perfectly good to use. Some mothers complain that defrosted milk smells sour, soapy, or fishy. It is not clear why this occurs, but general agreement in the lactation community is that the milk can still be used as long as the baby does not reject it.

REFERENCES

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