

Breast milk shared to help babies via online and offline communities

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Sharing breast milk to feed babies is a practice dating back millennia, and the Internet has facilitated the process creating some surprising exchanges.

According to a new study from the University of Central Florida, sharing [breast milk](#) is thriving today and in Central Florida it appears high income, highly educated white women are some of the people to most often use the Internet to facilitate the exchange.

Another surprise out of the study: Breast milk isn't just being exchanged in containers.

"I was surprised by the high prevalence of overlap, where women who were donors were also recipients" for their babies, said Beatriz Reyes-Foster a sociocultural anthropologist at UCF and one of the authors of the study, which recently appeared in the journal *Breastfeeding Medicine*. "And many of them aren't exchanging milk in containers, they're cross-nursing."

Cross-nursing (directly breastfeeding someone else's baby, often incorrectly referred to as wet-nursing, a professional service) seems to be a modern-day reality as well.

The popularity of breast milk may be linked to the growing number of research articles that indicate that breast milk is beneficial for children. The children tend to be more resistant to disease early in life and less

likely to contract several diseases later in life, including juvenile diabetes, multiple sclerosis, heart disease and cancer before age 15. For women who can't produce their own milk, sharing is an alternative.

And while there has been some concern raised in the medical community that the Internet is a dangerous way to exchange milk among strangers with little or no way to guarantee the quality or safety of the milk being exchanged, the UCF study didn't find the exchange among strangers something that routinely happens in Central Florida. They also found that the buying and selling of milk was rare.

"The idea that women are buying milk from strangers over the Internet and having it shipped through the mail was not supported by our study," said Shannon K. Carter, assistant professor of sociology and co-author on the study. "The [medical community](#) seems to have a perception that women are buying or obtaining breast milk from anyone who will provide it and that they can find on the Internet. We found milk sharing to be a much more complex process, involving friends, friends of friends, and hybrid online/offline communities."

The UCF team, which also included assistant professor of sociology Melanie Sberna Hinojosa, circulated surveys through Facebook to 18 Central Florida parenting communities, the Human Milk 4 Human Babies and Eats on Feets Florida web pages, personal web pages, and the [web pages](#) of 20 professional contacts. The study is based on the responses and analysis from 392 participants.

Most of the participants in the survey were college educated with 64 percent having earned a bachelor's degree or higher. About 47 percent of participants had household incomes above \$70,000 and most women said they were unemployed. The majority of women (70 percent) had one or two children and all but one respondent had been sharing breast milk since 2010.

Alison Serra, of Orange City, knew she wanted to breastfeed her daughter because of all the benefits, but her plans to do it on her own didn't work out.

"When I struggled to breastfeed my daughter myself, I knew that I had to pursue the next best option," said the former substitute teacher. "Milk sharing eased the pain of not breastfeeding my daughter for as long as I had hoped. I just had to seek out that which I knew was best for my baby."

Serra, who participated in UCF's study, was able to give her daughter Alaina breast milk from 2012 to 2014 thanks to an exchange network. Alaina is now three-years-old and Serra is expecting her second child. She said if needed, she would again turn to milk sharing.

"It was an incredibly positive experience," she said. "The [women](#) who shared milk with my daughter were more than happy to do so and I am so grateful for each of them. This is the power of community and technology and love."

As for the safety concerns, Serra said research is important.

"I support milk sharing communities," she said. "I think research should focus on the safety of the practice, the unknown mechanisms at work in breast milk, and teaching safe handling and storage and donor screening."

Provided by University of Central Florida

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