

Informal sharing of breast milk gains popularity among women, despite safety risks

October 25 2019

Table 1: Characteristics of publicly available blog posts discussing receiving donor breast milk

	Via Informal Milk Sharing		Via Milk Bank		p-value
	Count	Percent	Count	Percent	
Number of Posts	49	75.4	16	24.6	--
Child in the NICU	8	16.3	11	68.8	<.01
Child with medical necessity for breast milk	15	30.7	12	75.0	<.01
In favor of milk banks	6	12.2	16	100.0	<.01
In favor of informal milk sharing	48	98.0	4	25.0	<.01
Listed concerns about using donor breast milk	23	47.9	7	43.8	insignificant
Positive emotions in response to receiving donor breast milk	30	61.2	15	93.8	<.05
Cited medical evidence	18	36.7	3	18.8	insignificant
Physician involved in using donor breast milk	13	26.5	12	75.0	<.01
Clinician involved in using donor breast milk	6	12.2	2	12.5	insignificant

Characteristics of publicly available blog posts discussing receiving donor breast

milk. Credit: Sood/Milanaik

Women who are unable to produce enough breast milk for their children are increasingly turning to "mother-to-mother" informal milk-sharing, a potentially unsafe practice that is discouraged by the pediatric medical community, according to new research being presented at the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) 2019 National Conference & Exhibition.

The research abstract, "Where to get Donor Breast Milk? Self-Reported Parental Motivations and Concerns Regarding the Choice of Informal Milk Sharing versus Milk Banks," will be presented on Saturday, Oct. 26 at the Hilton New Orleans Riverside in Grand Ballroom A.

A related research abstract by the same author, "An Analysis of Parental Opinions of Human Milk Sharing Options," will be presented during the same session.

"Informal milk sharing is becoming increasingly popular and widespread," said Nikita Sood, researcher at Cohen Children's Medical Center/Northwell Health in New York. "It is therefore crucial that physicians become aware of this practice and the associated risks so that they can educate patients and address this growing concern."

More than 50% of 650 mothers who responded anonymously to a survey shared on Facebook said they did not have any safety concerns about the informally donated breast milk, and almost 80% did not medically screen the donors because they "trusted them." AAP discourages the use of informally shared breast milk because of the risks of potential spreading of disease or exposure to medications, alcohol, [illegal drugs](#) or other contaminants.

Table 2: Motivations and Concerns of Milk Bank Recipients Regarding Donor Breast Milk Use

	Count	Percent
Total Recipients	233	--
<i>Were any of the following a motivation for choosing milk banks?</i>		
<i>Safety of breast milk</i>	90	38.6%
<i>Anonymity of donor</i>	8	3.4%
<i>Preferential donation to preterm or sick infants</i>	64	30.5%
<i>Health professional's recommendation</i>	106	45.5%
<i>Did you have any concerns regarding the use of donor breast milk?</i>		
<i>Yes, potential disease transmitted through breast milk</i>	22	9.4%
<i>Yes, potential presence of medication, alcohol, or illegal drugs in the breast milk</i>	9	3.9%
<i>Yes, potential bacterial contamination of breast milk</i>	7	3.0%
<i>Yes, potential the dilution of breast milk in other types of milk</i>	2	0.9%
<i>Yes, cost of the breast milk</i>	24	10.3%
<i>Yes, possible legal issues</i>	9	3.9%
<i>No</i>	157	67.4%

Breast milk: Where to Get DBM. Credit: Sood/Milanaik

AAP recommends exclusive breastfeeding until about 6 months of age, followed by continued breastfeeding as complementary foods are introduced. Women who are unable to produce enough milk to exclusively breastfeed their child may supplement infant diets with formula or donor breast milk that is available through formal milk banks. More than half of the survey respondents who do not use a milk bank to obtain [breast](#) milk cited concerns about the cost, followed by concerns about quality and ability to obtain a prescription for [breast milk](#).

The related study, "An Analysis of Parental Opinions of Human Milk

Sharing Options," found a majority of online parenting blog posts that discussed milk-sharing focused on informal milk sharing without addressing safety concerns.

Table 3: Thematic Analysis of Concerns Regarding Donor Breast Milk

	Receiving Donor Breast Milk		Donating Breast Milk	
	Informally (n=49)	Via Milk Bank (n=16)	Informally (n=37)	Via Milk Bank (n=20)
Disease Transmission	20 (40.8%)	5 (31.3%)	8 (21.6%)	3 (15.0%)
Bacterial Contamination	15 (30.6%)	5 (31.3%)	4 (10.8%)	2 (10.0%)
Drug/Alcohol Transmission	17 (34.7%)	3 (18.8%)	7 (18.9%)	3 (15.0%)
Milk Dilution	1 (2.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.7%)	1 (5.0%)
Legality	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.7%)	0 (0.0%)
Costs	0 (0.0%)	2 (12.5%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)

Breast milk: An analysis of parental opinions. Credit: Sood/Milanaik

"Not only are our patients unaware of the potential risks that they are undertaking when participating in these informal [milk](#) sharing practices, they are also often not informing their physicians," Ruth Milanaik, DO, at Cohen Children's Medical Center/Northwell Health in New York said. "In addition to educating patients, physicians must underscore the importance of discussing these habits with medical professionals so that we have the necessary information to make accurate diagnoses should a medical need arise."

More information: 1) Abstract Title: Where to get Donor Breast Milk? Self-Reported Parental Motivations and Concerns Regarding the

Choice of Informal Milk Sharing versus Milk Banks

2) Abstract Title: An Analysis of Parental Opinions of Human Milk Sharing Options

Provided by American Academy of Pediatrics

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