

Sharing breast milk may pose risks women haven't considered

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Survey shows few ask about health of donor, discuss option with doctor

(HealthDay)—Women may be using shared breast milk from friends and family, but they don't always consider the risks involved with providing donor milk to their babies, a new survey shows.

As many as one-third of women don't consider the health of a breast milk donor. The researchers also found few women are discussing with their doctor the option of using donor breast milk from a friend or family member before engaging in the practice.

"We're trying to play catch-up to understanding something that thousands of women are already doing so that [health care professionals](#) and women can make better decisions for themselves and their babies," said Sarah Keim. She is a principal investigator with the Center for Biobehavioral Health at The Research Institute at Nationwide Children's Hospital in Columbus, Ohio.

"Our study found that friends and relatives and the media are playing a huge role in education and dialogue around breast milk sharing, but that [health care](#) practitioners are being left out," Keim said in a hospital news release. "And that's concerning, because there are risks involved with feeding your baby breast milk from another woman—friend or stranger."

The American Academy of Pediatrics has a clear policy on the dangers associated with feeding babies unpasteurized milk, but there are no guidelines on the sharing of breast milk among friends or relatives.

Many women want to breast-feed but can't, which has caused the unregulated breast milk industry to flourish, according to the study authors. Breast milk is bought, sold and traded with the hope of providing infants with its proven health benefits.

But, previous studies have shown that breast milk sold online may be contaminated with cow's milk, chemicals or bacteria. Nonprofit milk banks screen donated breast milk rigorously, but their limited supplies tend to go to hospitalized, premature babies.

Breast milk sold at milk banks can cost up to \$4 per ounce, forcing some women to turn to friends and relatives for help.

In investigating this issue, the researchers asked 500 new mothers in central Ohio what they knew about breast milk sharing and if they had ever used donated milk, or had donated milk themselves. The researchers found women with more education and higher incomes were more likely to be aware of breast milk sharing and to have considered engaging in this practice than women with less education and lower incomes.

Of all the women polled, 77 percent were familiar with breast milk

sharing. Of these women, 67 percent said they would consider the health of the mother before using her donated milk. The researchers pointed out the remaining 33 percent of respondents didn't consider this a priority. Meanwhile, 27 percent of the women surveyed said that they hadn't considered the safety of using another woman's breast milk.

Roughly 4 percent of the women had either used or donated breast milk or given it to another woman's child. Less than half of these women did so with friends or relatives. None of the women reported buying breast milk online, according to the researchers.

About 45 percent of the women said they produced more milk than their child needed.

"This is the first study to look at the characteristics of [women](#) who are more or less likely to engage in the practice of [breast milk](#) sharing, and can help give physicians a starting point for dialogue with their patients," Keim said.

"If you have difficulty with breast-feeding, seek help right away, and if breast-feeding isn't an option, work closely with your baby's pediatrician to come up with a plan for feeding your baby that meets their unique needs. Some babies have difficulty growing or have medical conditions that require different strategies," Keim advised.

More information: The U.S. Food and Drug Administration provides more information on the use of [donor breast milk](#).

Paper: "Breastmilk Sharing: Awareness and Participation Among Women in the Moms2Moms Study." *Breastfeeding Medicine*. October 2014, 9(8): 398-406. doi:10.1089/bfm.2014.0032

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