

My story- Donating Lyddia's Milk

I found out on October 29th that I lost my only daughter, my third child, 9 days before her due date. My water broke that night, and she was born on October 30, 2014. Before leaving the hospital, the nurse, who was an L & D nurse, not a postpartum nurse, flubbed her way through my discharge instructions. She told me my milk would come in and several ways to stop it. Over the next couple of days, everyone I spoke to kept telling me ways to stop my milk supply. Perhaps they were being sensitive to my loss, but no one spoke of other options.



I always hated the postpartum period. The bleeding, the sadness, the cramping. And then there were all the boob issues. Engorgement, soreness, cracking nipples. But all of those hardships were always worth it when I would sit and snuggle with my baby. Even when it hurt, the pain was always lessened when I smelled that little newborn baby head and heard those little grunting, sucking noises. I nursed both of my boys past a year- the first 15 months, the second 17 months. I thought I was a breastfeeding expert at this point. I assumed I was going to breastfeed my Lyddia. It never crossed my mind that I would be at this crossroads, making a decision of what to do with my dead daughter's milk.

To this day I do not know where I got this idea, but somewhere deep in the recesses of my mind, I remembered hearing a story of a mother who lost her baby and donated her milk. It was one of those stories that you hear and think, "Wow, what an awesome thing to do, but I don't know if I could ever do something like that." Much like many of you reading this story are thinking right now. I also had a good friend whose baby was born very premature, and I remember vividly her struggle to pump, how grateful she and her husband were for donors, and how essential breastmilk was in her baby's healing and ultimate release from the hospital.

I started searching for milk donation information online and was really confused by some of the information I received. Almost everything I found about Lactation after Loss was about

stopping your milk and very few vague resources about donating. I talked with my midwife and doula and both of them were very supportive. My midwife talked to me a little about establishing my supply, and she gave me the number of a good friend of hers who is an IBCLC. I started pumping with no plan of when I was going to stop. I always just told myself that I would take it one day at a time.

The first few days were hard because there was so many friends and family around. I had to learn to be okay with people watching me pump - something that even still does not feel natural, unlike nursing. My close friends, sister, and mother would sometimes sit with me and talk with me while I pumped. After the house cleared out, I continued on in my journey again just taking it one day at a time. Sitting in my rocking chair ... arms empty, sometimes crying, sometimes numb ... pumping.

As hard as it was, pumping gave me a sense of rhythm to my day. My heavy breasts forced me to get out of bed in the morning when I might otherwise have been tempted to stay there all day. It gave me hunger and a desire to fix and eat healthy filling foods when I might not have otherwise. I didn't drink much at night or take any sleeping pills when I might otherwise have been tempted to just become numb.

To be honest, there was a part of me that did this just because I really didn't know what else to do. I was a new mother and this is what new mothers do, right? I know that the milk I donated was a blessing to so many, but the selfish part of me just wanted to hold my baby. I didn't want to have to give my milk away. But this little act helped me feel like I was just another mother doing what new moms do - feeding.

Exclusive pumping was hard work. It takes a lot of time between pumping, cleaning, organizing. Every time I went out for more than a few hours, I had to take the pump along. I began pumping at the breakfast and dinner table so I wouldn't be so alone in my pumping. My two boys became very familiar with the pump (and loved to push the buttons). My husband and I went on a weekend trip before Thanksgiving, and I had to stop to pump in the car every few hours. There were many times that I was ready to give up, but then something would happen, I would figure out a new way to make it work, and I would continue on. I pumped through all my maternity leave, Thanksgiving, and Christmas, and ultimately decided to stop when I returned to teaching in January.

I pumped 5-6 times a day for almost 3 months and donated over 2,000 oz. to a premature baby with special needs and to the milk bank. As hard as it was, I am grateful to bless other moms with what I see as Lyddia's gift. In this small act I was able to share her legacy of love beyond the short nine months she was with me. She left this world far too early but I am blessed to be able to share her life with others in this way.

Pumping and Donating after Loss

Why You Might Want to Donate

There are many reasons that a mother might want to donate after loss. First, it is a real and tangible way to give life to others in spite of the loss you are suffering. For many babies, especially those born premature and with special needs, breastmilk really can be life-saving.

Another benefit that I hadn't considered before going through the process was the importance of occupying my time. As I stated in my story, it gave me a rhythm to my day- forcing me out of bed and keeping me busy. Looking back I see how critical this was to my own emotional healing. It kept me from becoming numb and just checking out, which can be my natural state of coping with hard things.

Finally, and this may be something unique to me, but I hadn't realized until it was over, the redemptive aspect that pumping played for me. After my loss, despite everything I read and was told, I still felt like Lyddia's death was my fault. My body had failed her in some way. There was something different I should have done....or not done. By pumping and producing milk for others I felt like my body was doing something right.-- doing something good. Later, looking back, I realized how important that was for my own healing.

Besides the idea of leaving a legacy for your child and the emotional benefits that can come from that, pumping and donating can also have physical benefits for the mom such as:

- Let-down releases oxytocin
- Pumping/ let-down stimulates contractions in the uterus, reducing risk of post-partum hemorrhage, and promoting the uterus to return to pre-pregnancy state
- Helps in hormone regulation
- Burns calories and may help mom lose 'baby weight'



Logistics of Exclusive Pumping

It can be hard sometimes to find information on exclusively pumping (EP) for a mother of loss. Most of the pages that reference EP are places like La Leche League, or other 'mommy' groups emblazoned with tiny newborn heads at the breast that may be hard to scan through. So here, in a nutshell are the basics of EP:

All of these recommendations depend on what your comfort level is, and what your goal for pumping is. Some moms might feel like they can only pump a little and just want to pump the excess before their body stops lactating. Other moms may want to donate all that they can, and want to fully establish their supply (and many moms, like myself, may just not know what they want). The recommendations here come from the literature and recommendations for a mom who is exclusively pumping for their infant. You can decide what you are comfortable with and how you would like to proceed.

How often should I pump?

First, if you want to fully establish a good supply it is best to have a good quality, double electric pump. Some mothers rent them from the hospital, others buy pumps such as Medela's Pump In Style. The quality of the pump can make a difference.

If you are aiming to fully establish your supply, most experts suggest pumping about every two hours, not going longer than three hours between sessions. The more frequently the breasts are emptied, the more milk the mother will make. Therefore, if she were to pump at least every 2-3 hours, for about 20 minutes, she should establish and maintain a good milk supply. In the first couple of weeks, she may also want to pump at least twice at night, but not all mothers do this. Do what you can, while also taking care of your own health.

To fully establish a supply, a mom should pump for about 15-20 minutes. Experts encourage pumping about five minutes past when the milk stops flowing, often by doing so mom will elicit another letdown, and at the very least will maintain production as well as encouraging increase in supply if needed.

More is not better when it comes to the suction settings on the breast pump. It will not enable you to pump less or get more milk. If you turn the suction up too high and are pumping frequently you will quickly become sore, and chapped.

How much milk should I get?

The first pumpings will be a very small amount. This is the colostrum or first milk. Once your supply is established (after about 3-5 days), you may get about 30 oz a day. So if you are

pumping 8 times a day, you might get about 3-4 oz per pumping. Every mother is different, and even the amount you pump from day to day may vary.

Keeping your supply healthy:

- First drink plenty of water, make sure to stay hydrated. Check your urine and if it is light yellow to clear, you are plenty hydrated.
- Make sure you eat. Try not to count calories at this point. Pumping can make you very hungry and it does that for a reason. You need the extra calories because you are burning so much to make milk. Eventually, your hunger should taper off.
- Get rest. If you are exhausted and have the opportunity to take a nap (even if it pushes your pump back) do it. You will actually get more milk when you are well rested. Even if you're not sleeping, rest by sitting down a lot. Conserving energy is important. Grieving is hard work, and pumping in addition is a lot to ask of your body. Give yourself grace and patience.

Pumping Tips to save your sanity

- Get a pumping bra, so you can go hands free. Use this time to knit, look at facebook, binge on Netflix or read a book. Sometimes I wanted to read about loss during this time, to think about my sweet baby and the gift she was giving. Other times I just wanted to check out and do what needed to be done. It's ok to do both.
- One of the best things a Lactation consultant told me in the beginning was to take a large ziplock bag and put all my pump stuff in there, and put it in the fridge between pumpings. Keeping it cold will keep it sterilized, so you don't have to clean between each pumping. I would clean mine every other day or so just by running it through the dishwasher.
- Another investment that was really helpful for me was to buy an extra set of bottles to store the milk in the fridge. That way I would only have to repackage (put the milk from the fridge into storage bags and into the freezer) about once a day.
- Pump while you are doing other things. This was another helpful thing for me to learn. In the beginning pumping was a time of solace, to retreat to my room and be alone. However, after about a month of that, I found it to be isolating. I started pumping at the breakfast and dinner table (as long as you family is ok with this). I just draped a blanket over myself and sat and ate with my family, and it made life a lot easier. When you have to sit still for 20 minutes, especially if you have other children to take care, it can be hard to carve out this time.

What to do with your milk

Milk bank – there is a wonderful network of milk banks, and if you live in one that does not have a milk bank you can donate to one in another state. Most have a minimum you have to donate, however some of them waive this requirement for moms of loss.

You do have to go through a blood test, however it is paid for by the milk bank. They also will ship you a cooler and pay for the shipping to have it sent to them. The main downside of a milk bank is that, because your milk could go to the most critical premies, they have to have very stringent guidelines for medications while donating. Even some over the counter herbs and medicines will have



a wait period on them. This may be hard for a mom who is grieving and may be taking sleeping pills at night or pain meds. However, this DOES NOT mean you need to dump this milk. You can share it another way, OR, that milk may be used for critical research purposes. Just be sure that you mark it in some way.

Mother to mother sharing – there is also a more informal method of sharing milk. Once a baby leaves the hospital it can be hard for a mom who is not able to breastfeed to obtain breastmilk. For those who are in areas where it is available, it can often be very expensive and cost prohibitive. There are several websites where moms with needs may post and be connected with moms who have milk to donate. I was connected to a mom through my midwife and I donated a large amount of milk to that mom when I wasn't able to donate to the milk bank. The mom was more than willing to meet me or come and pick up the milk, and was very grateful. Some sites to consider are:

- [Eats on Feet; Facebook page](#)
- [MilkShare; Facebook page](#)
- [Human Milk 4 Human babies; Facebook page](#)

Keep some- Breastmilk can be very beneficial to immunity. I decided to keep some for my older kids, for when they get sick, to use on eye and ear infections, and a host of other things. Another option to consider is to look into breastmilk jewelry. There are several places online that can take a small amount of breastmilk and turn it into beautiful beads, pendants and rings. This can be a wonderful token of love to remember your lost little one.

When I started I committed to one day at a time. Remember that if you chose this path, to continue to give yourself grace and peace for each day.

References

On Exclusive Pumping:

<http://kellymom.com/bf/pumpingmoms/pumping/exclusive-pumping/>

<http://www.mother-2-mother.com/ExclusivePumping.htm>

Expressing and Storing Milk:

<http://www.la lecheleague.org/nb/nbjulaug07p168.html>

Benefits of breastfeeding to mom

<http://www.llli.org/nb/nbjulaug01p124.html>