

Honey Pots and Donkey Hats:

Understanding Colostrum

by Sarah Hung IBCLC

Many mothers worry whether or not they have enough milk (or indeed any milk) for their newborn babies. This anxiety can heighten when they do not see any milk in the first few days. In fact, it's normal to have very small volume of milk in the first three to four days. This milk is colostrum and an average colostrum feed is only a teaspoonful - 5 mls.

Honey Pots

When we think of milk we usually think of a liquid which is like white water. If you spilt it, it would run everywhere. But in fact colostrum is much more like honey than like water. Honey tends to be thick and sticky. Honey comes in a range of colours from very pale, through bright yellow to a brownish yellow colour. Likewise colostrum is thick and sticky and comes in a range of yellowish colours.

If a baby is sick or premature the mother will be asked to express her colostrum and collect it for her baby. Sometimes the colostrum is thick in the ducts and difficult to get out.

If you had a jar of honey that you couldn't get the lid off – would you assume it was empty? No. You would simply ask someone with strong hands to help you open it. It is the same with colostrum except that you need a more gentle touch. If you don't see any results straight away, gentle massage will help the milk to flow. As a baby feeds he uses both his hands and his mouth to gently massage your breast and this helps get the colostrum out. Copy his movements, with your hands, and the colostrum will start to flow.



Donkey Hats

Many mothers worry whether such small quantities will fill her baby. The function of colostrum is not to fill your baby but rather to keep him breastfeeding. A farmer who wants his donkey to pull a cart uses a hat with a carrot. The donkey sees the carrot and tries to walk towards it, thus pulling the cart. If the farmer was stupid enough to let the donkey get the carrot then the donkey would sit down and eat it and no longer pull the cart.

Colostrum is just like this for the baby. The baby starts to feed and after a while gets a drop of colostrum. He likes it and keeps sucking. Another drop comes and he still likes it, so he continues to suck. The baby doesn't stop sucking because he gets full but rather because he runs out of energy and needs a sleep before he can continue.

If however, the baby is given a supplement, the baby does get full and so loses the urge to continue sucking until his stomach is empty again. We don't want the baby to stop sucking. The more practice the baby gets at breastfeeding with colostrum, the better the baby will be at drinking the mature milk when it comes. Remember, practice makes perfect.

Hand-expressing colostrum is much more productive than using a pump. To express milk, place your fingers, with your thumb and index finger one to two inches back from the areola (the darker-skinned area). As you bring your fingers together, bring your hand backward and inward toward your chest, instead of outward toward your nipple. There is a wonderful video showing how to hand-express at <http://newborns.stanford.edu/Breastfeeding/HandExpression.html>