

**“We just kind of had to figure it out”:  
Information Needs of Mothers Who Express Breast Milk**

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### **Background**

The increased prevalence of human milk expression among mothers of healthy, term infants has emerged as a recent lactation trend, with electric pump the most common mode<sup>1,2</sup>. Existing research has focused on establishing prevalence rates at various time periods, reasons for this trend, and its impact on breastfeeding duration<sup>1-4</sup>. There is a gap related to the information needs of mothers who express.

### **Method**

An interpretive description qualitative research approach was used. Semi-structured audio-taped interviews were conducted with 35 mothers of infants aged birth to 24 months old in two health regions in Western Canada. Participants were recruited via information handouts posted at public health offices and included in postpartum information packages.

### **Findings**

Many mothers received helpful advice, but most mothers also experienced information gaps.

**Sources of information** - included healthcare providers (HCPs), internet, friends/family, and other mothers. Conversely some mothers described HCPs being unable, or unwilling, to provide expression information with provision of inconsistent information also common.

- *The health nurse that came to my house talked about it because of being engorged. She brought it up, just to express to be more comfortable*
- *So that was really helpful for me to learn to use their hospital pump*
- *I didn't feel like I had anyone in the health region that I could ask about it until I discovered the lactation consultant, or I was relying on friends ... so my barrier would be a lack of information. And I remember watching YouTube videos about the pump itself, cause my girlfriend had given it to me and I got no instructions with it*
- *I had to do a lot of research myself online, reach out to people online and pumping support groups*
- *Any advice I got was various opinions from various nurses, which could vary a lot ... So, I don't know why there's so much different information, but it is really frustrating*

**Topics** – content areas where mothers received helpful advice or experienced an information gap

#### **How to express**

- *The NICU staff said if you're interested in doing more effective hand expression, cause it does take a little bit of practice to get it going, that was something that I did appreciate them trying to inform me of*
- *There's no information that tells you pumping is an option, or what a breast pump is, or how to use a breast pump, or how to express on your own*

#### **Frequency, timing and duration of expression**

- *I had very different information on how often I should be pumping. I wasn't sleeping because I was so intent to be pumping every three hours or as often as I could.*

- *The lactation consultant came in and said pump 5 minutes, and how you just need to get that stimulation going, just to get your milk up, that's your main priority right now. And it was probably three weeks ... that I was finally able to produce just all breast milk for her*

### **Storage**

- *I had read online. I actually threw away some breast milk, because I thought I could only refrigerate it for so long and then I read you could keep it in the fridge for longer ... But yeah, nobody tells you about storing or thawing.*
- *They didn't tell me the storage guidelines or anything. I got that from the public health nurse when I asked. She gave me a pamphlet*

### **Product information**

- *Information on the breast pumps themselves would have been helpful ... I have looked things up but even things like how to store breast milk correctly and the importance of cleaning the parts correctly. I think that would be valuable for people to know.*
- *Even just the pros and cons of a manual versus electric ... or what the average price is for one*

### **Milk supply management**

- *The lactation nurse talked to me a little bit about pumping and encouraged that if I wanted to breastfeed maybe I should try pumping to help bring in the milk.*
- *I didn't have anybody to ask questions about breastfeeding or what I should be doing to increase my supply. So maybe if they got those questions answered and realized that they could pump and go back to work.*
- *A good tip would be don't worry about the ounces ... cause you can kind of get caught up in like 'oh I only pumped 2 ounces today' ... the best advice I got was just pump what you pump and it's fine.*

### **Support and encouragement**

- *Mostly what she did was reassure me that what I was doing was right. It was nice to have a bit of reassurance from the lactation consultant. And she gave me more ideas with the phalanges too*
- *I had one nurse come and she goes "oh man I wish I would have done it this way" and whether she even meant it or not, it was just nice to hear someone reaffirm your choice. ... Because I'm exhausted, I'm tired*

## **Conclusion**

There is an intergenerational knowledge gap as many older women have not acquired experiential knowledge regarding expression. In addition, some HCPs are hesitant to offer guidance, perhaps not wanting to appear to encourage "unnecessary" expression. When education is lacking, mothers turn to less reliable information sources<sup>3</sup>. To address this, HCPs offering breastfeeding support should assess for expression learning needs at each encounter and offer non-judgmental advice on appropriate expression including helping mothers to make evidence-informed decisions. In addition, health organizations should collaborate to create digital resources offering accurate and accessible expression information.

## **References**

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