Recipient Mothers’ Experiences of Human Milk Sharing: An Opportunity for Support
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Learning Objectives
1. Provide an overview of mothers’ experiences and motivations for participation in peer-to-peer human milk sharing as recipients.
2. Discuss key barriers and facilitators to peer-to-peer human milk sharing for recipient mothers.
3. Describe the relationship between receiving donor milk from a peer and mothers’ perceived stress and maternal mental health postpartum.
4. Identify resources and support strategies that provide information and guidance for safe milk sharing between peers.

Overview
- Background/Purpose
- Research Methods
- Key Findings
- Implications for Practice

Background & Purpose

Peer-to-Peer Human Milk Sharing
- The donation and receipt of human milk (via wet-nursing or expression) for altruistic purposes, among friends, family, and/or through online social networks.
- “Modern day milk sharing” is on the rise
- Many barriers to receiving and donating via regulated milk banks

Purpose of Research
1. Milk sharing is controversial and often stigmatized
   - What BARRIERS and SUPPORTS do mothers face?
2. Women who do not breastfeed or fail to meet their breastfeeding goals are at increased risk for postpartum depression (PPD)
   - How/Does this apply to mothers who participate in peer-to-peer breastmilk sharing?
These 2 studies aimed to examine:

1. recipient mothers’ experiences—barriers and supports—of milk sharing, and
2. the relationship between using donated human milk and mothers’ perceived stress and mental health postpartum.

**Research Methods**

**Methods**

- Phenomenological inquiry into peer-to-peer breastmilk sharing among recipient mothers
- Recruitment online - HM4HB: https://www.facebook.com/hm4hb/
- Semi-structured individual interviews with mothers from the US and Canada (N=20)
- Open and axial coding to analyze data

**Findings**

**Facilitators**

- Informed decision-making and transparency
- Support from healthcare professionals

**Barriers**

- Substantial effort required to secure milk
- Institutional barriers
- Milk bank specific barriers
- Lack of awareness and acceptance of human milk sharing as an infant feeding option

- Various personal situations led to milk sharing
- Primary Motivations: health benefits, medical need, strong preference for human milk over substitutes
- 50% had diagnosed or self-identified PPD
- Breastfeeding challenges were primary trigger for participants’ anxiety and depression
The women at La Leche League were very helpful, were willing to help troubleshoot and they didn’t make me feel pressured, like the lactation consultant did. She was not supportive of receiving donated milk. She suggested formula instead and I was not able to go back to her a second time because I was supplementing with breastmilk instead of formula. It was against her organization’s rules so I used the tips she gave me and then went onto La Leche League for additional help. – Melissa A.

…when we finally got to the lactation consultant, she’s the one, that after I had already known about the peer-to-peer, I’d finally had the guts to ask her. I said, ‘what do you think about donated breastmilk from moms on a Facebook community?’ And she’s like, ‘well, legally I can’t tell you what to do’ or ‘I can’t tell you to do that because that’s not what we’re supposed to suggest to people.’ But, she said, ‘off the record, the nurses here that work on the OB floor, they share milk all the time.’ – Jess G.

Luckily we had been very educated because of our Bradley teacher, midwives and everything, so we were able to communicate that to them [hospital administrators] and the scientific reasons why we wanted to stick with our milk and that we were willing to get up and leave the day after a C-section, rather than change our baby’s milk. And our midwives—head of the birthing center department—really had our back and she came and talked to the whole head of pediatrics for that hospital system . . . She really kind of took him to task about this and they came back about 12 hours later and said . . . ‘We’ve written you guys a temporary policy so that you guys are fine [and can use the donor milk in the hospital] And we are going to rewrite our hospital policy so that this doesn’t happen again.’ – Beth B.

Fear of running out of donor milk

• Some reported anxiety, fear, and stress related to being able to secure a large enough supply of donor milk to meet child’s needs

Planning and coordination to secure donor milk

• Logistical efforts to secure donor milk (e.g. travel, telephone contact, scheduling) was a time-consuming and emotional challenge

Donor milk provided relief and comfort

• Mothers said using donor milk was comforting because they did not have to compromise their beliefs about infant feeding.

Donor milk use decreased symptoms of postpartum depression and anxiety

• Mothers said donor milk reduced or provided protection from symptoms of PPD and anxiety.

Donor milk sharing completely reduced postpartum anxiety. That’s the only anxiety I had, was how am I going to feed my baby. And then people would come through and give me milk and it just took it away. It made that challenge go away. – Karen D.

Implications for Practice

KEEP CALM AND SHARE YOUR BREASTMILK

Donor Milk Feeding
Supporting Mothers Interested in Peer-to-Peer Milk Sharing

1. Normalize interest
2. Encourage discussion with healthcare providers, but caution about possible responses
3. Provide information, resources, and support
4. Focus on informed decision-making

Academy of Breastfeeding Medicine’s 2017 Position Statement on Informal Breast Milk Sharing for the Term Healthy Infant


Conclusion

- In addition to children’s health benefits, donor milk use may support mothers’ mental health.
- Need to reduce barriers & increase support
- Open communication between parents and healthcare professionals about milk sharing—including benefits, risks, and ways to mitigate them—is recommended

Helpful Links

1. La Leche League on Milk Donation and Sharing: https://www.llli.org/breastfeeding-info/milk-donation/
4. KBC - Milk Banking, Sharing and Donating Resources: http://ksbreastfeeding.org/resources/milk-banking-sharing-donating/
7. Eats on Feet: http://www.eatsonfeets.org/
References


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