

MILK MATTERS

‘The Breastmilk Bank’ - Cape Town, South Africa

‘Mothers Expressing For Others’ and in the process saving babies’ lives.



In the high-tech world of the modern Neonatal ICU there is no substitute for breastmilk. All over the world it is recognised that only breastmilk offers premature babies the nutrition and protection essential for their survival. When a vulnerable baby's own mother is unable to supply breastmilk, a breastmilk bank can offer this life saving gift from another mother.

Milk Matters is one such breastmilk bank and is devoted to saving the lives of primarily premature babies in Neonatal ICUs who do not have access to their own mother's milk. These babies usually weigh less than 1.5kg, in fact most are under 1.2kg, and they thrive on the irreplaceable nutrients, growth factors and antibodies in human milk.

Milk Matters is run by a small but dedicated team, supported by loyal volunteers, for example hosting depots and various professionals serving on the Milk Matters Advisory Panel.



Ethan weighed only 630g at birth.



Donor mother, Terri, with baby Gabi,
weighing 720g.

The two main reasons for Milk Matters supplying donor milk is when a mother is too ill to provide breastmilk for her own baby or is unable to physically be with or regularly visit her baby, bringing her own breastmilk. Donor milk may also be needed for a short time in the case of multiple births such as twins or triplets, when the mother may initially not have enough breastmilk for her babies. Sadly some recipient babies have been abandoned or orphaned. Severe drug addiction of mothers also has an impact on the need for donor milk. Despite restricting the supply to the smallest, most vulnerable premature babies, the demand for donor milk exceeds supplies and there are still many more premature babies who would benefit from donor breastmilk.

With a high premature birth rate in South Africa and many challenges facing those babies and mothers, the demand for donor breastmilk is high but sadly supply does not meet the demand.

Vastly increased public awareness about the need for breastmilk donation as well as making donating easy for more moms can change this. To alleviate the dire shortage of donated breastmilk, we need to ensure that mothers are not still throwing away expressed breastmilk, unaware they could be donating it, and we need more Milk Matters depots where moms can conveniently drop off frozen breastmilk donations and collect sterile milk containers.

Mothers need to know that donor breastmilk not only provides optimum nutrition, but helps protect premature babies from potentially fatal infections, especially the dreaded Necrotising Enterocolitis, or NEC as it is commonly known.



Neonatologist Dr Alan Horn of Groote Schuur Hospital says,

"I firmly believe that the practice of Milk Banking is still in its infancy, globally and especially in South Africa. I expect it will steadily increase in profile and will progressively gain support until it overshadows blood transfusion both in the public and medical eye."

Donating breast milk is an act that involves the least pain and the most gain, compared to any other human tissue or organ donation. It is potentially life-saving and is worth more than equipment or staff. Together with KMC, it is an intervention that most doctors themselves cannot give, but most mothers can - it completes medical care.

The term Milk "Bank" is perfect - it simultaneously describes the safety and the value of donated milk."

Milk Matters started providing donor breastmilk to the Neonatal ICUs of Cape Town's biggest state hospitals in 2003. To date over 30 hospitals, in both the state and private sector, have received donor milk from Milk Matters and in addition we have assisted 5 hospitals to set up their own in-house milk banks. Over 80% of the donor milk goes to babies in the state hospitals, where the need is highest.

As a breastmilk bank Milk Matters' ultimate goal is not just to provide donor breastmilk to as many babies in need as possible, but to encourage and support all mothers in breastfeeding their own babies. Donor milk helps do just that when used in the correct circumstances.



Thousands and thousands of premature babies have received donated breastmilk - a gift of life, hope and love from over 2750 mothers who have donated breastmilk to Milk Matters so far.

Since just 50ml of breastmilk can feed a baby of less than 1kg for 24 hours, mothers do not need to donate large quantities of breastmilk to make a significant impact on the health of vulnerable babies.

Some donor mothers make once-off donations of stock-piled milk that is not required for their own baby, whilst other mothers donate for periods varying from a few weeks to a year or more.

Milk Matters provides donors with sterile containers, which can be collected from one of the many Milk Matters depots, where batches of frozen milk can also be delivered.

Ensuring the safety of the donor milk we provide is of paramount importance to Milk Matters. To facilitate this, all donor mothers are required to complete a screening process including a screening questionnaire and having an initial HIV and Hepatitis B blood test, at no expense to the donor mother.

All milk is pasteurized to inactivate bacteria and viruses in the milk, including HIV, and milk is also sent for microbiological testing. Information is provided to donor mothers and recipient hospitals on the safe handling of donor milk.



Milk Matters is a registered Non-Profit and Public Benefit Organization (NPO Number: 053-121-NPO, PBO Number: 930 024 054), which relies on both charging Milk Processing Fees and on donations from individuals and organizations to maintain the current service and to expand. Donations can be in the form of financial assistance or a donation of services, skills or goods. Milk itself is a human tissue so cannot be sold, but a milk processing fee is legal and necessary to help cover some of the running costs, with donations and fundraising covering the balance of the costs.



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Every donation, of any size or form, makes a considerable difference to Milk Matters' ability to provide breastmilk to babies who so badly need it.

Breastmilk donation is a unique opportunity for breastfeeding moms to make a difference to lives of some of our most vulnerable babies – a life-saving difference!

A neonatal ICU nursing sister knew all too well the risks of formula feeding when she gave birth to a 990g baby when she was only 6 months and 4 days pregnant, but all her attempts to produce enough breastmilk failed. *"I knew formula was not even an option"*, she said, gratefully accepting donor milk from Milk Matters for her tiny son.

"I will forever be indebted to all the mothers who donated breast milk to Ashton. Your milk gives these small babies hope and a chance at life. Ashton is now a normal, typical boy of his age and an example of the miracle of milk, love, and prayers."