

# What is Colostrum and Why is it Important for my NICU Baby?

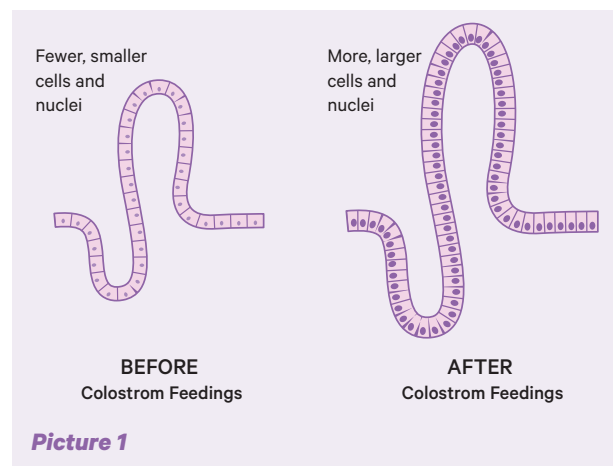
**Colostrum is the name of the milk that mothers make during the early days after birth, and it is more like a medicine than a food for your baby.**

Most mothers make just drops of colostrum at first, but these precious drops help your baby in important ways. Mothers of premature babies make colostrum with higher amounts of medicine-like substances and their colostrum lasts several days longer than in mothers with full-term babies.

## How is colostrum different from the milk that I make later in lactation?

Colostrum gradually helps your baby change from drinking amniotic fluid before birth to drinking milk after birth. It has three important purposes:

- Stimulate **rapid growth** of the cells in your baby's intestine, increasing the area in the intestine that digests milk (Picture 1). More intestinal cells make it easier for your baby to digest both your milk and other foods as your baby grows.



- Stimulate many digestive juices (called **enzymes**) in your baby's intestine to become active. These enzymes help your baby break down, absorb and use the nutrients in your milk so that he or she can grow as fast as possible. These digestive juices stay active in your baby's intestine long after breastfeeding ends. Some studies link these enzymes to a reduction in lifetime health risks, such as lactose intolerance.
- Provide concentrated substances that **protect** your baby from serious diseases such as necrotizing enterocolitis and infections.

## How do I know the difference between colostrum and mature milk?

Colostrum does not stop on a specific day after birth. It gradually changes from a yellowish, thick substance to a bluish-white color over the first month. Early colostrum can also be greenish, brownish-green, and have streaks of blood.

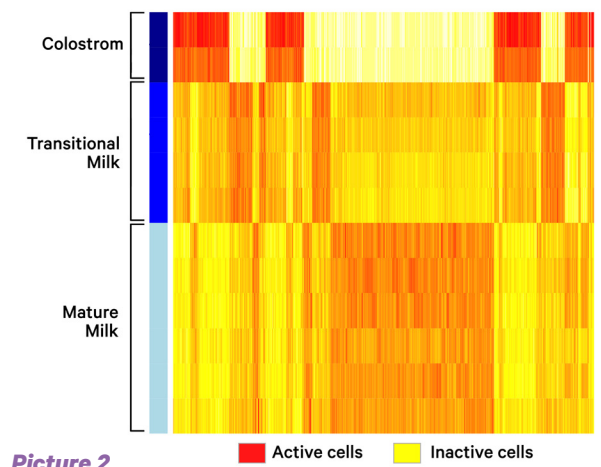
## My doctor told me to pump and dump (discard) my milk because of my health condition and/or medications. Should I throw away my colostrum?

**You should NEVER throw away colostrum.**

Bring it to the NICU and our lactation specialists will determine the safety of feeding your colostrum. It is almost always better for your NICU baby to receive your colostrum than either formula or donor milk.

## I had not planned on breastfeeding or pumping long-term. Can my baby benefit if I just provide my colostrum for a week and then stop pumping?

Yes! Many NICU mothers start off this way. Colostrum for a week protects your baby from infection—both during and after the NICU stay. Picture 2 below shows what the milk-making cells in your breast are doing during different stages of lactation. The red color tells us the cells are active and the yellow color tells us they are not active. For colostrum, you see a bright red color that goes away when colostrum ends and does not come back again. The red color for colostrum corresponds to extremely protective milk substances that fight infection. So, even if you provide your milk for a few days, your baby gets this important protection.





## Disclaimer

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We look forward to your inquiry at: [contact@lactahub.org](mailto:contact@lactahub.org)