

UC San Diego

UC San Diego News Center

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Nov 19, 2020

University of California Health and UC San Diego Launch Only Accredited Milk Bank in Southwest

First milk bank to open in San Diego will help improve the lives of fragile babies statewide



Individuals intent on improving the health of the babies in neonatal intensive care units (NICUs) have donated generously to expand and support the milk bank. Photos by Erik Jepsen/University Communications.

University of California Health (UCH) and University of California San Diego Health (UC San Diego Health) have launched a nonprofit human milk bank to serve families in Southern California and statewide through all six UCH academic health centers.

Pasteurized, donated human milk is critical for feeding sick or premature infants when parents do not have a sufficient milk supply for their baby’s nutritional needs. Operated by UC San Diego Health and located in the San Diego Blood Bank, the new facility represents one of the first groundbreaking partnerships between a blood bank and a human milk bank.

The University of California Health Milk Bank, the first milk bank located in San Diego, is the only Human Milk Banking Association of North America (HMBANA) accredited milk bank in Southern California, and only one of 30 nonprofit milk banks in North America.

Improving the lives of fragile babies is a key focus for Lisa Stellwagen, MD, the executive director of the milk bank and the facility’s medical director—the only nonprofit milk bank in North America directed by a physician. A professor in the Department of Pediatrics at UC San Diego School of Medicine, Stellwagen brings years of clinical and academic experience to the job, with an expertise in milk banking, infant nutrition, breast milk feeding and medical care of newborns.



David Wellis, CEO, San Diego Blood Bank, and Lisa Stellwagen, MD, Executive Director, University of California Health Milk Bank.

“California has high rates of chest/breastfeeding and there is plenty of extra milk, especially when so many parents are working at home during the pandemic. But there is a huge distribution problem that has resulted in shortages of pasteurized donor milk for ill or premature infants. A significant percentage of NICUs in our state are still not using donated human milk despite more than a decade of scientific evidence regarding the important benefits to the smallest infants,” said Stellwagen. “We aim to address these shortages and disparities in donor milk use in our region.”

A milk bank accepts donated frozen mother’s milk and processes it to provide a safe pasteurized human milk product for hospitalized and/or fragile children. Healthy breastfeeding or pumping mothers who have 100 ounces or more of extra frozen milk are welcome to contribute to the University of California Health Milk Bank. Mothers complete an extensive questionnaire and are carefully tested before donation; the milk is also tested and processed, using high quality laboratory practices.

The University of California Health connection



University of California Health and UC San Diego have launched the only accredited milk bank in Southwest U.S.

Not only will the milk bank provide a lifeline through donated human milk to babies in need in Southern California, its supply will be available to newborns at all UC academic health centers, as needed. As part of an academic health system, families at UC hospitals will have access to milk donation and experts who will also support families statewide.

“The University of California Health connection is an important one,” said Executive Vice President of University of California Health Carrie L. Byington, MD,

who is a pediatrician and infectious disease specialist. “A human milk bank is such an important resource for our communities. Human milk is critical for the growth and development of infants, and it protects them from infection. Having human milk is an investment in the long-term health of these very fragile infants. This is just the kind of innovation our academic health system can undertake to support the health of infants across the state. In addition to providing a lifeline through donated human milk to babies in need, we have at UCH the extensive experience and knowledge that will also educate, support and empower families about infant nutrition.”

Patty Maysent, CEO of UC San Diego Health added, “UC San Diego Health is honored to play a central role in the new milk bank. We are deeply committed to providing patients with access to comprehensive care, and the service provided by the milk bank will enable us to further fulfill that commitment. The impact to families will be tremendous and reflective of our mission and vision to deliver outstanding patient care and create healthier lives.”

Donor parents generously share this lifesaving gift but receive no payment.

In the hospital setting, donor milk provision is considered food/nutrition for the infant with no cost to the family. For families at home, health insurance (both private insurance and MediCal) may pay for donor milk if baby or parent has a medical indication.

Donors helped to launch the milk bank

Individuals intent on improving the health of the babies in neonatal intensive care units (NICUs) have donated generously to expand and support the milk bank. In 2016, Hannah and Zach Johnson committed \$1 million to launch the original Mothers’ Milk Bank at UC San Diego. Inspired by the progress that was made, the couple signed an intent to give an additional \$4



Operated by UC San Diego Health, the University of California Health Milk Bank is located in the San Diego Blood Bank.

million in 2019 to support ongoing operations and create an expanded milk bank for University of California Health at a new location in the San Diego Blood Bank.

The Johnsons had a vision, backed by philanthropy, which was pivotal in the opening of the University of California Health Milk Bank. “Having young children of our own inspired us to take a deeper look at the discrepancies in childhood nutrition and how we could lend a hand in creating a healthier

outlook for the next generation. Our passion for this project came from recognizing how many health issues can be linked back to childhood nutrition and how improvements early on can really impact the lifelong health of people in our community.” said Hannah.

“My big dream would be that we are able to provide any family in our community access to donor milk in the early stages of their infant’s life,” she continued. “The immediate need is in the NICUs in our community. The infants who are very fragile or have a lot of medical issues are the ones with the greatest need. It’s really life or death for them—whether they can get access to donated human milk.”

Other donors, including Geneviève Tremblay Jacobs and Paul Jacobs, know first-hand the importance of a milk bank for the health of a premature infant.

Geneviève Jacobs explained, “I used donor milk with my first baby, which I had via a C-section at 35 weeks. They suggested it to me in the NICU and I immediately said yes, because I knew it was so much better than giving her formula. I see the advantages very clearly for premature babies, who already struggle with their health. They’re so small and they have so many problems with digestion—it makes their life much easier with donor human milk.”



For families at home, health insurance (both private insurance and MediCal) may pay for donor milk if baby or mother has a medical indication.

Why the San Diego Blood Bank makes sense

UC San Diego Health developed the idea of working with community partners to create a milk bank by locating the only HMBANA accredited pasturing, processing and distribution facility in the Southwest in the San Diego Blood Bank.



Mothers are carefully tested and complete an extensive questionnaire; the milk is also tested and processed, using high quality laboratory practices.

This unique collaboration between a milk bank and a blood bank just makes sense, according to David Wellis, CEO of the San Diego Blood Bank. “The blood bank and the milk bank are working together because we have the same mission: we want to ensure our community’s health.”

He said, “When Dr. Lisa Stellwagen from UC San Diego Health approached us about potentially working together, I immediately saw not only the strategic alignment of our two organizations, but there’s a tactical alignment as well. We’re already making deliveries every single day to the hospitals where that human milk will be used. And so that’s just how it kicked off. It was an alignment of vision and a synergy around tactics. It is a unique relationship, and I’m very excited about it.”

Private support is funding operations

As one of only two nonprofit milk banks in California, there is a continuing need for private support to fund ongoing operations. Philanthropic donations given to the University of California Health Milk Bank contribute to the [Campaign for UC San Diego](#)—a university-wide comprehensive fundraising effort concluding in 2022. Alongside UC San Diego’s philanthropic partners, the university is continuing its nontraditional path toward revolutionary ideas, unexpected answers, lifesaving discoveries and planet-changing impact. To give, please visit the University of California Health Milk Bank [giving webpage](#). #UCMilkBank

Visit [University of California Health Milk Bank](#) for more information. Email ucmilkbank@health.ucsd.edu with questions or to donate milk.