

By Jade Griffin Sep 29, 2016



Studies show that preterm infants benefit most from human milk. The Mothers Milk Bank will help address the current disparity between supply and demand for donated human milk in San Diego.

Gift to UC San Diego Will Establish San Diego's First Mother's Milk Bank

For newborn infants, research consistently shows that human milk provides the healthiest possible start to life. The impact is even more significant for premature babies, yet many of these tiny patients—who need human milk the most—may not get it, as their mothers are often ill and may not produce enough milk for their baby. While over the past decade more hospitals across the country have begun offering babies donor human milk, not all San Diego hospitals have access to donor milk due to costs, lack of knowledge and critical shortages in supply.

With the goal of addressing this important need and giving all local infants the nutrition necessary to thrive, a generous gift was recently made to the University of California San Diego to launch the Mother's Milk Bank at UC San Diego. The center will be the first community milk bank in the region and only one of two in California.

The usual recipients of banked human milk are infants with very low birth weight (less than 1,500 grams or 3.3 pounds) or infants with intestinal injury. Research shows that breast milk empties from the stomach faster, matures the intestines and results in less feeding problems than formula. Infants who are breastfed have less necrotizing enterocolitis (a severe intestinal infection) and other life-threatening infections, and they tend to go home faster from the NICU and have improved developmental outcomes. Many neonatologists now advocate that the smallest preterm infants should not be fed infant formula but instead be fed their mother's own milk and/or donor milk as the basis of their nutrition until they reach a more mature stage of development.



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The Mother's Milk Bank, which will be established by the Division of Neonatology at UC San Diego Health, will collect and provide donor milk to local hospitals for the optimal care of infants who need the milk most. The bank will also aim to work with community partners to improve area breastfeeding education and awareness regarding the need for donations of excess milk, as many mothers with excess milk know very little about milk donation. The Mother's Milk Bank will be led by Dr. Lisa Stellwagen, professor of clinical pediatrics at UC San Diego School of Medicine, lactation director for the UC San Diego Supporting Premature Infant Nutrition Program (SPIN) and medical director for Newborn Services at UC San Diego Health, and Dr. Jae Kim, professor of clinical pediatrics at UC San Diego School of Medicine and nutrition medical director for SPIN.

“Breastfeeding is the ideal source of nutrition for healthy term infants, but premature infants are born unable to start with breastfeeding and that is why we focus on pumping mother's milk instead,” said Kim. “Mother's milk versus formula is far superior in preventing serious infection and inflammation in vulnerable premature infants. Yet, the current demand is outstripping supply, which is why we are so passionate about a Mother's Milk Bank in San Diego.”

Today, there is a disparity between the amount of donated milk available and the number of infants who need access to donor human milk. There are only 24 human milk banks in North America that screen, process, pasteurize and distribute donor milk. Currently, the San Jose Mother's Milk Bank is

the only non-profit milk bank in California, and it supplies human milk to most of the western United States.

Initially, the Mother's Milk Bank at UC San Diego will work closely with its counterpart in San Jose to develop the best methods of collecting, processing and distributing milk in our area. Mothers who donate milk are carefully screened with a questionnaire and blood testing, and the milk is tested for bacterial growth. Some milk that does not fit the strict safety criteria may be made available for research use in collaboration with the UC San Diego Human Milk Research Repository, to be studied by many scientists in the region. In addition to collecting new supplies of breast milk, education and outreach will be a crucial element to the mission of the new bank.

“While breast milk provides the most vulnerable babies with critical nutrition that they need, many community hospitals find offering access to donor milk a challenge,” said Stellwagen. “Our goal is to focus on educating the community on the importance of breastfeeding in general, and to introduce the concept of milk donation if mother has an excess supply. Additionally, we hope to assist and encourage more area hospitals to use human breast milk as part of their care.”

According to Kim, “We expect to reduce infant morbidity and mortality in the region by generating more milk for the region and building awareness of the importance of human milk for premature infants.”

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