



NEWS

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Donated human milk program provides specialized nourishment for high-risk infants in NICU at Saint Luke's Hospital

Saint Luke's Hospital first NICU to offer donor human breast milk

KANSAS CITY, Mo. – Mothers of low birth weight and high-risk babies who are unable to provide enough of their own breast milk have a healthy new option in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) at Saint Luke's Hospital of Kansas City — donated human milk.

The value of human milk to nourish and protect an infant has been well documented in medical literature for many years. For babies with formula intolerance or feeding issues related to prematurity, human milk acts as a safeguard from illness and helps the intestinal lining to develop in ways that formula cannot.

Now a program in the NICU at Saint Luke's offers these infants the option of donated human milk. The donated milk is simply mother's milk that is pumped and shared by moms who want to help other babies. It is acquired from milk banks across the nation that follow strict guidelines developed by the Human Milk Banking Association of North America. Donors do so without monetary gain and are carefully screened for health risks, similarly to the way blood banks screen donors. Milk donations from several mothers are combined at the milk bank, pasteurized and treated prior to shipping.

"Human milk is the preferred feeding for all babies but especially for premature and high-risk infants," said neonatologist Barbara Carr, M.D. "It's nutritionally and immunologically the best feeding for baby and all substitute feedings differ markedly from it. To provide the best care, we believe based on current evidence that donated human milk will give our smallest patients a chance at the healthiest start possible."

Infants meeting select weight, medical and feeding criteria in the NICU at Saint Luke's will be offered donated human milk at no additional charge. It is the first – and only – NICU in the Kansas City area to implement the use of human donor milk.

“Breast milk is always our first choice,” said registered dietitian Stephanie Howard, MPH, RD, LD. “However, when mother's own milk isn't an option, donated human milk is the next best thing to feed a premature baby. We feel very fortunate to be the first hospital in the area to provide that option for babies in the Saint Luke's NICU.”

Human milk contains important antibodies that protect infants from infections and may decrease the risk of allergies. It also contains many components that promote growth and is more easily digested, which is a frequent concern with preterm or high-risk infants. Studies show that breast feeding has also been linked to slightly enhanced cognitive performance.

“Our milk program has been an overwhelming success so far,” Dr. Carr said. “Parents of babies who are eligible to receive donor milk are truly embracing the opportunity. They want to offer their babies the best chance to thrive from the earliest stages of life.”

Saint Luke's has the highest level of NICU in Kansas City. The 40-bed Level III-B NICU cares for extremely premature, low birth weight and critically ill infants. Board certified perinatologists and neonatologists staff the unit 24/7 and, along with a multidisciplinary team of health professionals, provide dedicated services to promote the best possible outcomes for babies.

Saint Luke's Hospital is a member of Saint Luke's Health System, which consists of 11 area hospitals and several primary and specialty care practices, and provides a range of inpatient, outpatient, and home care services. Founded as a faith-based, not-for-profit organization, our mission includes a commitment to the highest levels of excellence in health care and the advancement of medical research and education. The health system is an aligned organization in which the physicians and hospitals assume responsibility for enhancing the physical, mental, and spiritual health of people in the metropolitan Kansas City area and the surrounding region.

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