

# “Got Milk?” May Be a Life-or-Death Question for Premies

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Protecting premature infants from a deadly intestinal disease, [new research](#) suggests, may boil down to a surprising combination: milk and bacteria. (1)

According to a new study, breastmilk provides a vital antibody that binds to bacteria in a premature infant's gut. Premies with higher amounts of bacteria bonded to the antibody from their mothers' milk are less likely to develop NEC, or necrotizing enterocolitis. And that's no small feat. The intestinal disease can cause distended abdomen, infection, low blood pressure and shock. [About 15% of infants who develop NEC die](#), and those who survive can face long-term health challenges. (2)

While researchers already knew that breastmilk [helps keep NEC at bay](#), this research begins to explain how. (3) The findings also reaffirm a growing tome of research on the benefits of breastmilk for premature infants.

But for health care providers and new parents, knowing that breastmilk can protect a premie isn't necessarily enough. Access to milk can be complicated. Direct breastfeeding may not be possible with fragile premies, and mothers who want to express breastmilk may not be able to produce milk – or may not have ac-

cess to a hospital-grade pump.

Donor milk is an important alternative, as a [lead researcher](#) on the study noted. (4) But [getting donor milk](#) isn't always easy either. Not all hospitals house a donor milk bank or can provide access to one. (5) Cost can also be a prohibitive factor – both for hospitals that aren't reimbursed for donor milk and for mothers whose health plans won't cover the expense.

***“The research makes this much clear: Whether from a premie’s mother or from a donor, breast milk has the potential to reduce intestinal complications and even save infants’ lives. Moving forward, policymakers and health insurers would be wise to look closely at the question of whether premature infants ‘got milk.’ ”***



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