

Storage, Handling, and Preparation of Breast Milk in Early Care and Education (ECE) Programs

Follow recommended storage and preparation steps to maintain the safety and quality of expressed breast milk for the children in your care. See below for general breast milk storage guidelines and best practices for storing and preparing milk safely in the ECE setting.

Type of Breast Milk	Storage Location and Temperatures		
	Countertop 77°F (25°C) or colder (room temperature)	Refrigerator 40°F (4°C)	Freezer 0°F (-18°C) or colder
Freshly Expressed or Pumped	Up to 4 Hours	Up to 4 Days	Within 6 months is best Up to 12 months is acceptable
Thawed, Previously Frozen	1–2 Hours	Up to 1 Day (24 hours)	NEVER refreeze human milk after it has been thawed
Leftover from a Feeding (baby did not finish the bottle)	Use within 2 hours after the baby is finished feeding	Use within 2 hours after the baby is finished feeding	Use within 2 hours after the baby is finished feeding

Some state and local ECE authorities may have different rules and guidance about storage and handling of breast milk at ECE sites. Check your state/local rules and regulations and share the relevant storage guidelines and labeling policies with your staff and families.

Storing Breast Milk



- Families may bring in prepared bottles of freshly expressed or pumped milk or thawed (previously frozen) milk.
- Encourage families to provide milk in small amounts of 2 to 4 ounces to minimize wasting milk if the child does not finish a bottle.
- Bottles should be labeled with today's date and the child's name.
- Bottles should have a cap over the nipple to keep it clean.
- Store milk immediately in a refrigerator.
- Prevent milk mix-ups:
 - » Assign storage bins to group each child's milk separately.
 - » Use color-coded or personalized labels, stickers, or bands.
- Breast milk can also be stored in an insulated cooler with frozen ice packs for up to 24 hours.
- Keep an appliance thermometer in the refrigerator and check it regularly. The refrigerator should be 40°F or below.

Feeding Breast Milk

- Wash hands with soap and water.
- Breast milk can be served cold, room temperature, or warm. It can be served in a bottle or cup.
- To heat refrigerated milk, place the sealed bottle into a bowl of warm water.
- Do not heat milk directly on the stove or in the microwave. Microwaving creates hot spots, which can burn a child's mouth.
- To avoid burning the child's mouth, test the temperature before feeding it to the child. Put a few drops on your wrist. It should feel warm, not hot.
- Swirl the milk to mix the fat, which may have separated.
- Provide families with a daily record of feeding times and the amount of milk the child drank.



Use leftover milk within 2 hours after the child stopped feeding



Cap the bottle to keep the nipple clean; store it on the counter or in the refrigerator



Discard leftover milk not used within 2 hours

Storing, Thawing, and Feeding Frozen Breast Milk

- If families bring frozen milk to store in the freezer, it should be labeled with the date the milk was expressed and the child's name.
- Always thaw the oldest milk first.
- Thaw milk in the refrigerator, or in a container of warm water. Do not microwave. Store thawed milk in the refrigerator until ready to use.
- Use thawed milk within 2 hours of bringing to room temperature or warming.
- Thawed milk should be fed to the child that day or sent home. Inform families if any of the unused milk being sent home was thawed that day in the ECE setting so they know to keep it cold and use it within 24 hours.
- Never refreeze thawed milk.
- Store frozen milk in the freezer until needed. Return unused frozen milk to families within 6 months from the date it was expressed.
- Keep an appliance thermometer in the freezer and check it regularly. The freezer should be 0°F or below.

Best practices for unused breast milk in the ECE setting

Unused milk stored in a refrigerator or cooler should be sent home daily.

- Because prepared bottles of milk will be labeled with today's date, the ECE provider may not know if the milk is fresh (never been frozen) or thawed (previously frozen) but the family will know. Fresh milk can be stored in the refrigerator for up to 4 days, but thawed, previously frozen milk needs to be used within 24 hours of thawing (See Table on the front page). Sending unused milk home daily allows families to better manage their available milk supply.