Breast Pumps: Don't Be Misled - Get the Facts

U.S. Food & Drug Administration

Breast Pump Basics

a. Breast shield: Cone-shaped cup that fits over the nipple and surrounding area.

b. Pump: Creates the gentle vacuum that expresses milk. The pump may be attached to the breast-shield or have plastic tubing to connect the pump to the breast shield.

c. Milk container: Detachable container that fits below the breast shield and collects milk

as it is pumped.

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On this page:

- Choosing the Right Pump for You [3]
- Should You Buy or Rent? [4]
- Keeping It Clean [5]

These days, many new mothers return to the workplace with a briefcase in one hand—and a breast pump kit in the other.

For those moms working outside the home who are breastfeeding their babies (and those who travel or for other reasons can't be with their child throughout the day), using a breast pump to "express" (extract) their milk is a must.

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) oversees the safety and effectiveness of these medical devices.

New mothers may have a host of questions about choosing a breast pump. What type of breast pump should they get? How do they decide ahead of time which pump will fit in best with their daily routines? Are pumps sold "used" safe?

back to top [6]

Choosing the Right Pump for You

Kathryn S. Daws-Kopp, an electrical engineer at FDA, explains that all breast pumps consist of a few basic parts: a breast shield that fits over the nipple, a pump that creates a vacuum to express the milk, and a detachable container for collecting the milk.

There are three basic kinds of pump: manual, battery-powered and electric. Mothers can opt for double pumps, which extract milk from both breasts at the same time, or single, which extract milk from one breast at a time.

Daws-Kopp, who reviews breast pumps and other devices for quality and safety, suggests that mothers talk to a lactation consultant, whose expertise is in breastfeeding, or other health care professional about the type of breast pump that will best fit their needs. Questions for new moms to keep in mind include:

- How do I plan to use the pump? Will I pump in addition to breastfeeding? Or will I just pump and store the milk?
- Where will I use the pump? At work? When I'm traveling?
- Do I need a pump that's easy to transport? If it's electric, will I have access to an outlet?
- Does the breast shield fit me? If not, will the manufacturer let me exchange it?

back to top [6]

Should You Buy or Rent?

There's also the decision of whether to buy or rent a breast pump. Many hospitals, lactation consultants and specialty medical supply stores rent breast pumps for use by multiple users, Daws-Kopp notes.

These pumps are designed to decrease the risk of spreading contamination from one user to the next, she says, and each renter needs to buy a new accessories kit that includes breast-shields and tubing.

"Sometimes these pumps are labeled "hospital grade," says Daws-Kopp. "But that term is not one FDA recognizes, and there is no consistent definition. Consumers need to know it doesn't mean the pump is safe or hygienic."

Daws-Kopp adds that different companies may mean different things when they label a pump with this term, and that FDA encourages manufacturers to instead use the terms "multiple user" and "single user" in their labeling. "If you don't know for sure whether a pump is meant for a single user or multiple users, it's safer to just not get it," she says.

The same precaution should be taken for "used" or second-hand pumps.

Even if a used pump looks really clean, says Michael Cummings, M.D., an obstetrician-gynecologist at FDA, potentially infectious particles may survive in the breast pump and/or its accessories for a surprisingly long time and cause disease in the next baby.

back to top [6]

Keeping It Clean

According to FDA's recently released website on breast pumps [7], the first place to look for information on keeping the pump clean is in the instructions for use. In general, though, the steps for cleaning include:

- Rinse each piece that comes into contact with breast milk in cool water as soon as possible after pumping.

- Wash each piece separately using liquid dishwashing soap and plenty of warm water.
- Rinse each piece thoroughly with hot water for 10-15 seconds.
- Place the pieces on a clean paper towel or in a clean drying rack and allow them to air dry.

If you are renting a multiple user device, ask the person providing the pump to make sure that all components, such as internal tubing, have been cleaned, disinfected, and sterilized according to the manufacturer's specifications.

Cummings notes that there are many benefits to both child and mother from breastfeeding. "Human milk is recommended as the best and exclusive nutrient source for feeding infants for the first six months, and should be continued with the addition of solid foods after six months, ideally until the child is a year of age," he says.

The benefits are both short- and long-term. In the short-term, babies can benefit from improved gastrointestinal function and development, and fewer respiratory and urinary tract infections. In the long-term, children who have been breast fed may be less obese and, as adults, have less cardiovascular disease, diabetes, inflammatory bowel disease, allergies, and even some cancers.

Cummings adds that moms and their families benefit by the bonding experience and economically as well, since a reduction in acute and chronic diseases in the baby saves money.

For women considering this option, FDA 's website [7] offers resources and information on breast pumps and breastfeeding. These include information on the selection and care of the pumps, in addition to describing signs of an infection or injury related to their use.

This article appears on FDA's Consumer Updates page [8], which features the latest on all FDA-regulated products.

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