Got milk? Nursing moms have another spot to donate

BY BOB GLISSMANN
WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

Breast milk protects babies against a host of illnesses and infections. Omaha-area moms who produce extra breast milk can donate their milk to help babies who need it.

The Nebraska Medical Center last week became the second drop-off site in Omaha for the Mother’s Milk Bank of Iowa, which is part of a network of 13 such banks in North America.

Methodist Women’s Hospital was the first Omaha site, opening last summer. Jennie Edmundson Hospital in Council Bluffs has been collecting breast milk for the Iowa bank since mid-2011. Children’s Hospital & Medical Center plans to begin collecting breast milk for a Denver-based milk bank in the next few months.

Nebraska doesn’t have such a bank.

Mothers who pump breast milk while at work sometimes amass more milk than their babies are able to drink, said Jean Drulis, co-founder and director of the Iowa milk bank. If women decide to donate their extra milk, they must go through a screening process, including a blood test, and meet certain guidelines. The tests don’t cost them anything, and they aren’t paid for the milk.

Breast milk taken to a drop-off site is put in a freezer until the Iowa bank picks it up, Drulis said. At the milk bank, workers thaw the milk of several donors, mix it together and pasteurize it before it’s frozen again and shipped to hospitals across the country.

Last year, she said, the Mother’s Milk Bank of Iowa distributed more than 780 gallons of breast milk.

Ten Omaha-area moms so far have donated two industrial-sized freezers full of milk at the Women’s Hospital, said Jill Kigerl-Owens, a lactation consultant in the hospital’s neonatal intensive care unit. Jennie Edmundson has had roughly the same number of donors and has collected a similar amount of milk, a spokeswoman said.

Omahan Rebecca Reedy started dropping off her extra breast milk at the Women’s Hospital in December after completing donor screening. She had filled up her upright freezer and the freezer above her refrigerator with milk that her baby, Levi, wasn’t drinking.

“I produce a lot of milk, apparently,” Reedy said.

Reedy, 30, said she felt bad throwing it out. “I would fill his bottles for day care and dump the rest of it down the sink. I was cringing: ‘Oh, this is horrible. People call it liquid gold.’”

Breast milk protects against respiratory illnesses, allergies, ear infections and gastrointestinal diseases, the American Academy of Pediatrics says.

Breast-fed infants have a lower risk of sudden infant death syndrome, the academy says, and people who were breast-fed are 15 to 30 percent less likely to develop obesity in adolescence and adulthood than those who weren’t. Breast milk also greatly reduces the incidence of a condition called necrotizing enterocolitis, which typically hits premature babies and causes their bowel tissue to die.

The donated milk, which usually is fed to babies via a syringe, isn’t meant as a replacement for the milk of the baby’s mother, Drulis said. She said it supplements that milk or serves as a bridge until the mother begins producing an adequate milk supply.

Premature babies might drink an ounce of the donated milk per day, Kigerl-Owens said. Over the last year, she said, 165 babies at the Women’s Hospital have gotten some donor breast milk.

Nebraska Medical Center officials decided to start accepting donated breast milk from screened mothers because of all the calls they had received from the moms of former NICU patients, said Ashlie Bergren, a medical center lactation consultant. The mothers, she said, would say, “‘You guys helped me in the hospital. I want to donate my milk.’ We were fielding so many of those calls that we said, ‘Maybe we’ll just do this.’”

Med center doctors prescribe donated milk for babies who weigh less than 1,500 grams — about 3.3 pounds — or who are very premature, Bergren said.

Babies whose mothers are sick or who are on medications to which the baby shouldn’t be exposed also get the milk, she said.

The Women’s Hospital gives the milk to babies up to 34 weeks gestation, Kigerl-Owens said.

Reedy, the donor mom, said Levi now is 10 months old and is losing interest in breast-feeding, so she probably won’t donate much longer. But she is happy to have had a place to take her extra milk.

“I’m just glad that someone can use it who really needs it,” she said.

For information about becoming a donor, call 1-877-891-5347.

Contact the writer:
402-444-1109, bob.glissmann@owh.com
twitter.com/bobglissmann
DONOR GUIDELINES

Nonprofit milk banks that adhere to Human Milk Banking Association of North America guidelines provide pasteurized milk from screened donors to fragile and sick infants, improving their potential to survive and thrive.

All donors undergo a screening process that begins with a short telephone interview. Donor mothers must be:

- in good health
- Not regularly on most medications or herbal supplements. There are some exceptions. Contact a milk bank for more information.

- Willing to undergo blood testing (at the milk bank's expense)
- Willing to donate at least 100 ounces of milk (some banks have a higher minimum)

For more guidelines and restrictions, visit www.hmbana.org/donate-milk.

Source: Human Milk Banking Association of North America