



LIQUID GOLD: Healthy, lactating mothers can express and donate their excess breast milk to distribute to neo-natal intensive care units around the country. Picture: 123rf.com

Filling the gap for the health of infants

Breast-milk banks are an initiative that has seen significant growth throughout the country with a huge increase of donors

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Lactating mothers, this one is for you. Did you know that your breast milk can save a life today? No, not your baby's life, but the lives of thousands of other prematurely born babies from across the country.

How, you may ask? Well, we all know about blood banks – with our donated blood saving thousands of lives across South Africa on a daily basis – but have you heard about breast milk banks?

This liquid gold is taken from healthy, lactating mothers who express and donate their excess

breast milk which is tested, pasteurised then distributed to neo-natal intensive care units around the country.

Many mothers who give birth to premature babies don't produce milk immediately or if they do, it's often not enough.

For other mothers, various health complications leave them unable to breastfeed. Regardless of the reason, being fed donated breast milk instead of formula dramatically increases the baby's chance of survival, while also offering greater protection against life-threatening infections.

It also assists these babies to not only gain weight but to

grow faster too.

It's usually the most vulnerable of babies who are fed with this milk as, every year, an estimated 11,000 premature babies die from preventable infections and complications.

Abby Courtenay, registered dietician and spokesperson for the Association for Dietetics in South Africa (ADSA), said all babies have immature immune systems.

"Breastfeeding plays a vital role in transferring not just nutrients but antibodies and other immune-boosting properties to an infant to strengthen the immune system and protect them against infections," she ex-

plained.

"This is why breast milk is the perfect first food, and why the World Health Organisation (WHO) recommends exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of life."

It's an important source of energy and nutrients in children, the WHO says on their website. It can provide half or more of a child's energy needs between six to 12 months while also playing a critical role during illness, reducing infant mortality in malnourished children.

The WHO further recommends early initiation of breastfeeding within the first hour of

birth.

"This is why donated breast milk is the next best option when the mother's own milk is not available," Courtenay added.

Launched in South Africa 16 years ago by the South African Breastmilk Reserve (SABR), breast milk banking is now available in 27 facilities across the country. Last year alone, the not for profit organisation had 1,158 donors with the milk benefiting 2,969 infants.

Other similar initiatives include Ithemba Lethu milk bank and children's home based in Durban, the KwaZulu-Natal Breastmilk Bank Initiative and

Milk Matters which operates in the Western Cape.

In Mdantsane, Cecilia Makiwane Hospital operates a breast milk bank, run in collaboration with SABR, which was established in 2015.

SABR executive director and founder, Stasha Jordan, said expressing milk has become the norm for many new mothers who have to return to work while breastfeeding.

She said: "What we would like to see is breast milk banking being used far more frequently. Some women have an abundant supply of breast milk and can easily express more than their baby needs. That surplus

can literally save the life of another child."

But which breastfeeding mother is eligible to donate their milk?

Any healthy, lactating mom with an excess of breast milk can get on board. It is, however, essential that you have not received a blood donation in the past year, that you are a non-smoker, you do not consume alcohol regularly and are not on any medication.

Donor mothers will have to undergo blood tests and be screened for both HIV and hepatitis B before they donate.

Donor moms are also requested to complete an online

screening questionnaire after which SABR contacts them telephonically to refer to the nearest sign-up facility. Questions asked range from any medication the mother uses, the availability of a breast pump and HIV status.

Once the questionnaire is completed, arrangements for the necessary blood tests are made. The donor mother will then receive all of the information they need for the safe storage of their expressed milk, which is collected from them.

"Our donor moms are real heroes, helping the most vulnerable in our society to survive," Jordan said.