

Milk Supply & Living Through a Loss

Loss is an inevitable part of motherhood. Most women experience some type of loss surrounding pregnancy and becoming a mother. They may have difficulty becoming pregnant, or they may have a miscarriage, or they may have challenges breastfeeding their baby. While it is hard to believe that loss occurs in today's high-tech medical world of super miracles, it does. Loss comes in many forms and has a unique meaning for each mother.

At MilkWorks, we are aware that loss also impacts and shapes a woman's perspective of whatever "comes next." She may literally "hold her breath" until she is past the point where she experienced a previous loss. This may be a certain time in her pregnancy, her labor, or her baby's first breastfeed.

While experiencing a loss is difficult, it can also be hard when we are a friend or family member or health care provider watching another woman experience a loss. It is easy to think we know how we might respond in a situation. The reality is that we don't until it happens.

For mothers in the middle of a loss:

- If you want to, please feel free to share your loss with MilkWorks. It helps us to know what is going through your mind. We may not be able to fix your loss, but it helps us to understand you and provide loving care during your loss.
- As you move through your loss, we encourage you to recognize your grief, find ways to honor what has happened, and be kind to yourself. You CAN survive a loss, but that does not mean it will be easy.
- The loss of a pregnancy or a newborn is especially difficult for a mother and may seem to be more than you can handle. Grief support services have identified certain actions that are helpful. We encourage you to:
 - Honor the memories of your baby - with a scrapbook, a piece of jewelry or a tree planted in your baby's name.
 - Stay active. Physical exercise releases hormones that help us cope. Walk, bike, run, or dance to both grieve and honor your loss.
 - Share your thoughts - even if those around you may not always know how to respond. If you need to hear a certain message from them, tell them what that message is. It may be nothing more than saying to them, "Don't try and talk me out of my sadness."
 - Allow yourself to experience the rituals of becoming a mother (even if your arms are empty) and give to others when you least feel like it. Maybe you need to buy an adorable baby outfit and donate it to a mother at a homeless shelter. Maybe you want to visit the hospital where you would have given birth and bring flowers to the nurses. There are many rituals that make up motherhood. Just because you have lost your baby does not mean that you must miss out on the rituals of motherhood.
- When you experience an infant loss, your breasts will most likely produce milk. Please see our information on ***Milk Supply After an Infant Loss*** for additional guidance.



If you know a mother who is in the middle of a loss:

- We want to know what to say or do to make it better. However, there are no magic words or actions.
- It is okay to say you are sorry for her loss. Ask if she wants to share what has happened. If she does, listen quietly. Don't try and talk her out of her feelings. Accept she is feeling what she is feeling.
- Acknowledge her baby's name. Send flowers (another ritual surrounding becoming a mother). Leave messages that you care for her and what she is going through. Let her know, "I am here for you."
- Feel free to ask her to go for a walk or meet for coffee, even if she declines.
- Love her and be there, even if she is sad and depressed. Don't try and make her feel better by excuses or rationalizations. Her pain and loss are real and you cannot take them away. All you can do is honor what she is going through.
- As she moves through her grief, she doesn't need you to mimic her grief. You may have experienced grief in the past, but you have survived it. Right now she does not need you to identify with her. She needs you to be strong enough to listen to her as she finds her way back to a new normal.

There are many online resources and books for mothers who have experienced a loss, and for family and friends who want to learn more:

- [Mourning Hope Grief Center \(Lincoln\)](#)
- [Connected Forever \(Lincoln & Omaha\)](#)
- [HEALing Embrace \(Omaha\)](#)
- [Scribbles & Crumbs \(blog\)](#)
- [Share – Pregnancy & Infant Loss Support \(online group\)](#)
- *Empty Arms: Coping with Miscarriage, Stillbirth and Infant Death* by Sherokee Ilse
- *Sunshine after the Storm: A Survival Guide for the Grieving Mother* (A collection written by mothers finding their way after the loss of a baby or child.)

Milk Supply after an Infant Loss

MilkWorks is here to support you through your own personalized journey coping with your loss. Please do not hesitate to make an appointment with one of our International Board-Certified Lactation Consultants (IBCLCs). When you experience an infant loss, your breasts will most likely produce milk. The following ideas may help your body adjust.

Decreasing Your Milk Supply

- Wear a supportive bra day and night to support your breasts and keep you comfortable.
- Apply a cold compress to your breasts for 20 minutes a few times a day. Continue using cold packs until your breasts no longer feel full.
- Express small amounts of milk from your breasts if they are hard and they hurt. Remove only enough milk for comfort. This will help your supply to gradually decrease. Here is a link to a video demonstrating massage and expression after an infant loss: <https://vimeo.com/374979707>
- Ibuprofen (up to 800 mg every eight hours) can help with inflammation and discomfort. Do not exceed 2400 mg in a 24-hour-time period.
- Sage leaves mimic estrogen in the body, which can slow the production of milk. Consider drinking several cups of sage leaf tea per day or use a commercial sage extract as directed.
- A decongestant with the sole ingredient of pseudoephedrine (e.g. Sudafed) may also decrease your milk. Try 30 mg once or twice a day as tolerated.
- If you want your milk supply to dry up as quickly as possible, discuss taking Cabergoline, a prescription

medication, with your health care provider or our Breastfeeding Medicine Specialist.

Avoiding Mastitis

If your breasts become very full and milk is not removed, it is possible to develop a plugged duct. You may feel a firm or lumpy area in your breast. If this happens, you may need to pump this breast a bit longer to resolve the plugged duct. If your breast becomes painful and/or red, you feel achy like you have the flu, and you have a low-grade fever (less than 38.4 C or 101 F), you have mastitis, an inflammation of the breast. Please contact your healthcare provider or see our Breastfeeding Medicine Specialist to determine if you need an antibiotic.

For additional guidance on resolving a plugged duct or treating mastitis, please see our information on Plugged Ducts & Mastitis. Once any concerns are resolved, you may resume decreasing your milk supply.

Other Options

Some mothers find comfort in pumping and donating their expressed breastmilk to help another baby in need. To explore this option, see our information on Milk Donation and Outreach Centers.

Other mothers may freeze a small amount of breastmilk as a keepsake or have a piece of breastmilk jewelry made.

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