



Preterm infant health and human milk

The need for regulation in the European Union

Human milk helps to reduce complications of preterm birth, e.g.



Intestinal disease including necrotizing enterocolitis¹



Later hypertension²



Late-onset sepsis^{3,4}



Chronic lung disease/bronchopulmonary dysplasia⁵



Vision disease/retinopathy of prematurity^{4,6}



Preterm birth remains the main predictor of life-long disability⁷

*Necrotizing enterocolitis (NEC), bronchopulmonary dysplasia (BPD) and retinopathy of prematurity (ROP) are common and severe complications of preterm birth

Human milk and preterm infant health

Human milk contains thousands of natural substances that are critical for infants, which is why the WHO recommends exclusive breastfeeding for every newborn for six months. To meet the specific nutritional needs of preterm infants, human milk is essential and particularly vital in preventing the onset of debilitating or fatal diseases.

Mother's own milk is the preferred option for infant nutrition to achieve optimal growth, development, and health. When mother's own milk is not available, donor human milk is the next best alternative, especially for preterm, sick and low birthweight infants.



Only 30% of mothers of extremely preterm infants are able to supply 100% of their milk to meet their infants' needs.⁸

In Europe, around 7,2% of infants are born preterm.⁹ That's 360,000 infants who need access to human milk annually.



The need for EU level regulation



Human milk banks collect, screen, store and distribute donor milk across the EU.¹⁰ However, the donation and allocation of human milk within these milk banks is without EU level regulation, guidance, or monitoring of supply.

This highly fragmented system and lack of oversight threatens the availability of human milk and therefore the health of preterm infants. This runs contrary to the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, which requires member states to ensure the provision of necessary medical assistance and healthcare to all children.¹¹



We request European policy makers to ensure that any revision of the Tissues and Cells Directive:

1. Recognises human milk as the best option for preterm, sick and low birthweight infants and has, at its core, the theme of ensuring a safe, secure supply for all mothers in need of milk for their infants. Mother's own milk is the first choice in infant feeding. When mother's own milk is not available, donor milk from a human milk bank is the preferred option.
2. Includes a delegated act on donor human milk to be developed in close cooperation with key stakeholders in infant care and human milk safety.
3. Ensures equitable access to safe donor human milk for preterm, sick and low birthweight infants as a key theme of the legislation and accounts for the practical specifics of human milk donation.
4. Endorses recognition, support and regulation of human milk banks in Europe.
5. Includes the need for EU-wide research and data collection of human milk donation and use.

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About EFCNI

The European Foundation for the Care of Newborn Infants (EFCNI) is the first pan-European organisation and network to represent the interests of preterm and newborn infants and their families. It brings together parents, healthcare experts from different disciplines, and scientists with the common goal of improving long-term health of preterm and newborn children. EFCNI's vision is to ensure the best start in life for every baby.

For more information, visit us at www.efcni.org.