

# Breastfeeding

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# OUTLOOK



## Considering the Udder Title...

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For years, I've heard people talk about breast milk. But for the life of me, I can't understand why we call it breast milk. As far as I can tell, milk is the only glandular secretion that is described by the organ or structure from which it comes. We don't, for example, talk about eye tears or mouth saliva or penile semen. So why do we call what comes out of our breasts breast milk?

Admittedly, we do refer to the fluid in the spine as spinal fluid. That's to differentiate it from fluid found in another anatomical part, say, for example, amniotic fluid. But as far as I know, milk comes from only one anatomical part: the breasts. I've been in practice for nearly 20 years, and I've yet to see ear milk or elbow milk!

Oddly, we correctly credit other species for their milk, yet we fail to do that for our own. We frequently speak about cow's milk or goat's milk; we don't call it udder milk or teat milk. Or, if we've spent substantial time in the library reading about mammalian milks, we'll talk about elk milk or reindeer milk. For us mammals who have two legs and can read this column, why then don't we call what comes out of our breasts human milk? Or at least, mother's milk!

Let's face it. English-speaking people simply aren't equipped to deal with the secretion from this particular exocrine gland. Notice, for example, that we talk about pig insulin to differentiate it from human insulin. When Humulin® came out, the manufacturer didn't name it Pancrealin. That, of course, is because no one had ever referred to the secretion from the pancreas as pancreas insulin. The oddity of naming a secretion for its gland leads to the problem of how, exactly, to spell it. Look at your textbooks or the World Health Organization's publications

or Pediatrics—any credible source you choose. You'll quickly find that we have breast milk, breast-milk, and breastmilk.

Going back a few years, you won't see the term breast milk in ancient publications. I checked my Revised Standard Version of the Bible, and saw several references to breasts or a mother suckling her young, but I did not see anything about breast milk. Digging through several articles and Apple's book,<sup>1</sup> it appears to me that this strange phrase was coined about the time that man-made milk appeared in the world. (And no, I'm not being sexist; the earliest substitutes for mothers' milk were designed and manufactured by businessmen.) In the mid-1800s, I suppose there was some need to differentiate milk produced by a mother from that produced in laboratories or factories. Thus, we have it. A single body part was used to describe milk; a seemingly disconnected but functional part that produced a product. Not the person, but merely her breast, was producing the perfect milk. There was apparently—and perhaps intentionally—no recognition that the milk was from a human, a woman, a mother.

The mantra of "human milk for human babies" won't stick as long as we talk about breast milk as though it's an anatomically-correct substance secreted by and fed to offspring of an unknown species. Let's clearly articulate what is authentic and what is man-made. Let's call that stuff that is made in factories artificial milk so that everyone understands that it's a mere imitation, an imposter, a fake. Let's leave no room for doubt that there is only one authentic, all-natural, no-additives, species-specific milk for human infants. Human milk!

1. Apple RD. *Mothers and Medicine: A Social History of Infant Feeding*. Madison WI: University of Wisconsin Press; 1987.