

Doctors caution against getting breastmilk from informal channels as the milk has not been screened



Huang Huifen

Public officer Nurhidayati Yahya welcomed her "third child" just two months after she popped her second one.

No, it was not a miracle birth. Little AzZahra, now four months old, is the "milk sibling" of her two children, after the 29-year-old donated 15 packets of her breastmilk for the baby girl to consume.

Under Islamic teaching, a baby who receives more than five feeds from a donor mum will have to become "milk sibling" with the children of the donor.

AzZahra was born prematurely at 33 weeks. She was hospitalised for 2½ weeks and fed through tubes. Without AzZahra nursing at her breast, her mum Alia Khaneez, 28, could not produce enough milk.

Not wanting AzZahra to be put on infant formula milk, Ms Alia, who has another child aged 21 months, sought the advice of Ms Nurhidayati, whom she knew through a friend and also via the Breastfeeding Muslim Mothers Support Group on Facebook.

Ms Nurhidayati, one of the group's founders, offered Ms Alia her excess milk.

"I felt very emotional when I gave away the breastmilk because I knew that it could help a premature baby. I feel so blessed to have another 'daughter,'" says Ms Nurhidayati, whose daughter Hafsa is six months old and son Umar, 2½.

AzZahra fed on the donated milk for about two days and the two mothers have become good friends since.

With no official milk banks in Singapore and the disappearance of wet nurses, mums who have trouble breastfeeding are turning to informal networks to get donated breastmilk.

Some have trouble breastfeeding for various reasons: from insufficient milk supply because the baby is prematurely born, underweight or suffers from severe jaundice and cannot suckle from the mum directly to stimulate milk production, to the change in routine when they return to work.

These mums usually look to supplement their breastmilk with donated breastmilk.



PHOTOS: ST FILE, EMMA KWASNICA, NURHIDAYATI YAHYA



Ms Emma Kwasnica (above, with her daughter Sophie) founded Human Milk 4 Human Babies, a global milk-sharing community network, after learning that a doctor was planning to peddle her brand of formula milk.



Four-month-old AzZahra Mohd Faisal (far left) is the milk sister of Hafsa Mohamed Rizal, six months old (left), after she received 15 packets of breastmilk from Hafsa's mum.

HIV may be transmitted from the milk to the baby, just like through the exchange of bodily fluids via sexual contact.

She adds: "In the absence of such regulations, mothers who share milk through informal networks run the risks of their baby being infected by such diseases and also food poisoning from the improper handling of the expressed milk. Hence I discourage mothers from sharing milk."

She adds that the babies of the donor and recipient should be the same age because the breastmilk composition varies for a premature baby and a full-term baby.

Singapore does not have a regulated milk bank, unlike countries such as Denmark, Sweden and Australia.

Dr Chua Mei Chien, senior consultant from the neonatology department at KK Women's and Children's Hospital, also advises against the practice of casual milk-sharing or procuring of milk from sources other than an established human milk bank. So if the mother is unable to provide her own breastmilk for her baby, KKH will substitute the feed with infant formula.

Thomson Medical Centre (TMC) takes on a more advisory role on milk-sharing.

Mrs Wong Boi Boi, assistant director (clinical) of Thomson ParentCraft Centre, says: "When the mother cannot produce enough breastmilk and wants to supplement with donated breastmilk, the alternative is to get it from her relatives or good friends who are nursing. But that is after we have told her the risks involved so she can make an informed decision."

Such cases are rare - she sees fewer than 20 cases of milk-sharing in a year.

No matter the risks, mothers such as assistant finance manager Sharon Seet, 32, sees milk-sharing as a form of support for mums who have difficulty breastfeeding.

The mother of a 6½-month-old son pumped about 230ml of milk and gave it to a fellow mum she met during a lactation consultation at TMC a month ago. The mum was struggling to breastfeed her newborn and Ms Seet offered some of hers.

"I was happy to help because I had been through a difficult time of breastfeeding, too. I suffered from breast engorgement, blocked ducts and blisters. I wished that someone would offer me her milk to tide me through that period. As a mum, I take utmost care of myself and watch my hygiene practices so that my breastmilk is the best for my child, so the milk that I give to others will be the same quality."

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Would you feed your child donated breastmilk? E-mail suntimes@sph.com.sg

Risky to share milk

On the other end, there are mums who have more than what their children need. Finding it a waste to discard their excess breastmilk, they want to donate it.

Breastmilk, which is superior to formula milk, can be stored for between 48 hours and up to a year, depending on the temperature and storage method.

Human Milk 4 Human Babies (HM4HB) on Facebook is one example of a thriving global online community for sharing milk.

It was started last October by Montreal-based breastfeeding activist Emma Kwasnica, whose three children are aged 23 months to seven years old. She was outraged that a well-known online doctor had plans to peddle his brand of formula milk.

"That was the last straw for me, that even a doctor is moving towards formula milk. We have to stand up as mothers to feed our babies with human milk," she says in a telephone interview with LifeStyle.

The network has more than 20,000 users in over 50 countries, including Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia. It makes clear that its role is to provide a platform to connect donor mums to recipients, so there is no way of tracking how much breastmilk is shared through the network.

Ms Kwasnica would say only that "hundreds of babies are being fed every day with human milk received through the network".

Since the arrangements are made pri-

vately between mothers, donors and their breastmilk are not screened for suitability.

Dr Yong Tze Tein, a senior consultant at the department of obstetrics and gynaecology at the Singapore General Hospital, thinks the health risks of sharing unregulated milk outweighs the benefits of breastmilk.

"A milk bank runs like a bank and requires stringent screening for diseases such as human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), social lifestyle history and pasteurisation of the breastmilk to make sure there is no contamination," says Dr Yong, who is also president of the Association for Breastfeeding Advocacy (Singapore).

She explains that since breastmilk is also a form of bodily secretion, diseases such as

My nitpicky son makes mealtimes hell



Seriously Kidding

Tan Keng Yao

I have a 20-month-old son whom I love dearly, but there are times when I would love him even more dearly if I could feed him his meals intravenously.

He has a hate-hate relationship with food. He refuses to eat most things offered to him, making mealtimes hell for me, and for his caregivers when I'm at work.

He will eat only mee suah, rice, cod fish, Chinese-style soup, potatoes, carrots, broccoli, papaya, grapes and fresh milk.

There is something from every food group here so, theoretically, he is not nutritionally deprived. But it would really be nice if he had a less selective diet.

Even within this diet, there are items that are suddenly not acceptable to His Royal Highness. He may eat carrot one day and eat it with suspicion the next. While he eats grapes, he spits out raisins.

Some days, he will deign to accept the food proffered, only to push the entire load out of his mouth while making a face as if to say: "Woman, why are you feeding me dog turd? Are you out of your mind?"

And those are his better days.

On bad days, he acts as if the spoon that bears the food actually holds a heap of smouldering coal. Attempting to avoid

ed calorific intake does not seem to have dampened his energy one bit.

A typical day sees him whirling around the house as fast as his matchstick-thin legs can take him, destroying things with superhuman speed and strength. (Case in point: He dragged a big Corningware pot off the kitchen counter and broke it.)

Yet, his paediatrician assures me that he is doing fine. His height is even in the 90th percentile of boys his age.

I don't know where he gets his energy from but it is possible that he gets an extra boost from solar power.

Surely, this food-hating toddler is not mine. My husband and I have healthy appetites and a love of good food. It has been suggested more than once that I might like to consider doing a DNA test.

After one particularly bad mealtime in which I morphed into a psychotic b***h screaming, "EAT EAT EAT!", I decided to seek answers on how to get him to eat a wider variety of food. I surfed the Internet, posted questions on forums and asked my friends, and received these pieces of advice.

"Your toddler is trying to assert his independence." Good to know but this does not solve my problem.

I also constantly try to feed him adult food off my plate. Does he take it? No.

There is no method to his madness.

On some days, he gets by with very little food. Mystifyingly, his severely limit-

ed all food that looks dark, such as chocolate.

"Don't turn mealtimes into battle-field. Be patient." When one buys a piece of fish fillet for \$6.50, a bag of panko for \$3, a bag of butter rolls for \$2.90 and spends time preparing the food and assembling bite-sized fish burgers, and all he does is take two nibbles of the butter roll, one needs to practise serious meditation in order not to lose one's cool.

"Don't feed him anything until the next mealtime. Then he'll be hungry enough to eat." I do not think he feels hunger. I think he is a cyborg.

I was also advised to try feeding him a special nutritionally balanced formula to fatten him up. I almost guffawed. My son, who won't eat anything that looks and tastes like real food, drinking artificially flavoured formula? In my dreams.

So, for now, my search for a solution continues while my son continues to subsist on love and fresh air.

His father and I are taking him to Hong Kong for a trip soon and I have no idea where to find homecooked mee suah there. Will my toddler starve to death in the land of dim sum and roast goose? That will be another story. Wish me luck.

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Tel: 6493-6952 **Info:** www.tab.com.sg

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Tel: 6377-1789 **Info:** [E-mail](http://e-mail) CFL2011@clubrainbow.org

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