

your walking medicine chest

Mothers' milk is the perfect panacea for a whole host of ailments—
from pinkeye to acne. Just a squirt will do the trick!

BY LIZ LAING

MOST PEOPLE KNOW about the health benefits of breastfeeding, but few know about breastmilk's medicinal benefits. Breastmilk is sterile, antibacterial, and has many healing properties. It can be used to treat a variety of ailments and can be applied topically for eye and ear infections, minor skin injuries, sore or cracked nipples, diaper rash, sore throats, and stuffy noses. Is breastmilk an everyday cure-all? Read on and judge for yourself.

When your child gets a cold and has a stuffy nose, drizzle breastmilk into each nostril. It will thin the mucus, and the milk's natural antibodies will help fight infection. Jay Gordon, MD, FAAP, IBCLC—a nationally recognized

pediatrician, author, and breastfeeding authority—encourages the use of breastmilk in this way. "I recommend breastmilk as the best nose drop for babies and children with colds," he says. "The milk kills viruses on contact (sounds like a TV commercial!), and the best part is that it makes babies sneeze. The sneeze sends viruses, bacteria, dust, and more flying out of the nose at 100 mph."

Several clinical studies have shown that since each mother's milk is made specifically for her own baby, it is effective in ridding the infant's eyes and nose of viruses and germs. I have used it on my own children, and even on myself. Recently, my son had pinkeye; when I applied my breastmilk to his eyes several times a day, the conjunc-

tivitis cleared up. A friend of mine used her breastmilk on all her family members whenever they got pinkeye, and thus for years she was able to avoid having to buy prescription eyedrops.

You never know when breastmilk will come in handy. I got liquid soap in my eye once while in the locker room at my gym. My eye was burning and extremely red, and rinsing it with water didn't help at all. I checked my purse for eyedrops but found none. Then I remembered the built-in medicine chest I carried around on my own chest. I went into a bathroom stall, cupped my hand, squirted out some milk, and bathed my eye in it. Ahhhhhh! Instant relief—the redness and painful stinging were gone.



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The author's daughter Kyla applies expressed breastmilk to a scrape on her hand using a cotton ball.

MORE WAYS TO USE BREASTMILK

- **Acne Treatment and Facial Cleanser** Wash face with a mild soap, rinse, and gently pat a breastmilk-saturated ball of cotton (not a synthetic material) over the entire face. This process is great for removing eye makeup as well.
- **Burns and Sunburn** Apply breastmilk gingerly to burns and they will dry up and look much better the next day. A burn treated with breastmilk and mashed-up blueberries will dry up within an hour, wrote one mom on a *Midwifery Today* online forum.¹ Elena Michaels, PhD, CCH, LMFT, a traditional naturopath in Santa Clarita, California, told me that she often applied her breastmilk to her kids' sunburns. "The soothing milk would stop the pain immediately," she said. "I believe the lauric acid found in breastmilk is antiviral, antibacterial, healing to tissue, and contains analgesic properties." Besides human breastmilk, virgin coconut oil is nature's most abundant source of lauric acid.
- **Chapped Lips** Dab a bit of milk onto dry lips, leaving them wet. Apply often, and lips should take only a day or two to heal.
- **Cold Sores and Fever Blisters** Place milk directly on a cold sore with a clean finger or cotton ball. This should speed the healing process and also help relieve some of the pain.
- **Cuts, Scrapes, Scratches** Clean wound first using breastmilk if you don't have soap and water. Drip milk onto the wound, then let it air-dry. You can also use a cotton ball or a 4-by-4-inch gauze pad soaked in breastmilk. If the cut is on a baby's lips or mouth area, allow him or her to nurse. An upset child will be calmed by the gentle, loving act of breastfeeding, and the milk will help heal the wound. "I'll never forget when my 15-month-old daughter was bitten by her grandma's dog right on her face," says Nancy Levesque, a former La Leche League leader. "I immediately put her to my breast and nursed her as we were deciding what hospital to take her to. I'm so glad that I was able to comfort her during this traumatic time, and I believe the act of nursing did help to begin to heal her wound."
- **Diaper Rash** Gently pat baby's bottom with breastmilk, being especially generous when applying it to reddened or rash areas. Leave baby's diaper off for a few minutes and let the bottom air-dry.
- **Ear Infections** Place a few drops of breastmilk in the ear; follow with warm (not hot) olive oil and garlic, or bottled garlic mullein oil (sold at natural food stores).
- **Red or Puffy Eyes** Place two cotton balls saturated with breastmilk over closed eyes for a few minutes—works better than tea bags or cucumber slices!
- **Insect Bites** With a clean finger, dab breastmilk on the bite; this will help stop the itching.
- **Skin Rash/Wounds** Apply breastmilk on itchy spots—even chickenpox—for soothing relief. One woman claims that she used her breastmilk to clear up an elderly relative's leg ulcers. It's also possible that breastmilk helps heal skin wounds in nursing women themselves.
- **Sore or Cracked Nipples** Gently rub milk onto nipples or area of soreness and let air-dry. Another option is to bathe the sore nipple by dipping it into a clean, shallow dish of breastmilk.
- **Sore Throats** Baby can benefit by directly nursing.
- **Warts** Leave a breastmilk-saturated cotton ball on the wart for a few minutes twice a day. Continue for several days until the wart dries up.

NOTE

1. www.midwiferytoday.com/forums/topic.asp?TOPIC_ID=383

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I was glad to have this option available, and felt proud that my body produces something that can be used to help heal other parts of my body. What a great way to recycle.

Besides colds and eye irritations, there are several other conditions that might benefit from the use of breastmilk. In most cases you simply express your milk into a clean saucer, cup, or bowl, then use a cotton ball or eyedropper to apply or squirt milk directly onto the area, as needed, for the desired results.

In many places—including Mexico, Russia, Africa, South America, and India—the use of breastmilk in alternative ways is quite common. One mother on a Midwifery Today online forum said, “In Nigeria, if a child has a condition of the eyes, such as mucus, we simply squirt a bit of breastmilk and it clears right up.”¹

Besides healing common minor afflictions, breastmilk has recently been in the news for helping to treat more serious illnesses. Adult cancer patients have been drinking breastmilk in an attempt to boost their immune systems and cope better with the side effects of chemotherapy.² While this is not a common practice, a milk bank in California has supplied a group of pioneering patients with breastmilk for the past few years. One lucky recipient of this donor milk, Howard Cohen of Palo Alto, California, strongly believes that ingesting breastmilk daily has helped his prostate cancer go into remission.³

Donor milk is used to treat a variety of health problems. I spoke with Pauline Sakamoto, RN, MS, executive director of the Mothers’ Milk Bank in San Jose, California, about some of the other ways breastmilk benefits people. “Historically, human milk has been used for dis-

eases and health conditions of adults and children and as a superior food for babies. These folk cures have been tested throughout time. Currently, there has been more interest in the scientific community to test the components of human milk’s effect on different health problems that plague us today. Hopefully, in the near future, we will validate the incredible power that our body has to promote growth, heal itself, and preserve

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its integrity via human milk.”

Breastmilk may even kill cancer cells. In 1995 physician and immunologist Catharina Svanborg and a team of research biologists at Sweden’s Lund University discovered in breastmilk a protein compound, alpha-lactalbumin (they gave it the acronym HAMLET), that selectively induces apoptosis in tumor cells.⁴ In other words, HAMLET makes cancer cells commit suicide. In fact, it has killed every type of cancer the researchers have tested it against. HAMLET has also been used to successfully treat virally infected warts, which were reduced by 75 percent in volunteers who received daily treatments with an ointment containing the protein. The same viruses that cause warts are also linked to cervical cancer, genital warts, and some types of skin cancer. Well, we all knew that breastmilk is powerful.

You may wonder why this discovery of a possible cure for cancer has not received greater attention. Funding is part of the problem, but slowly, in the past decade, more attention has been paid to this small laboratory in a quiet corner of the world. Even the American Cancer Society has given its stamp of approval by giving a grant to Svanborg

and her team to help fund further research into their discovery.

While this type of scientific news is exciting, let’s not forget the real miracle of breastmilk and its primary use. The healing powers of this liquid gold are incredible enough, but breastmilk’s most amazing quality is that it gives life. No other food or substance on earth comes close to doing what breastmilk does. Human breastmilk is the

ideal food for human babies. Pediatrician Jay Gordon reminds us how crucial breastfeeding is when he says, “Babies denied breastmilk during the first year of life get sick and die at a much

greater rate than babies who nurse.” I am still amazed when I watch my son nurse. I know that his healthy, growing body is thriving because he is suckling the perfect food, which my body makes for his body. But in addition to satisfying this primary need, my breastmilk can help heal his body in other ways as well.

NOTES

1. www.midwiferytoday.com/forums/topic.asp?TOPIC_ID=383
2. Michael Day, “Adults Turn to Breast Milk to Ease Effects of Chemotherapy,” *Daily Telegraph* (16 January 2005); www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2005/01/16/nteat16.xml
3. “The Man Who Swears by Breastmilk,” *BBC News Online*, UK edition (23 January 2005): <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/4187697.stm>
4. Catharina Svanborg, MD, PhD, “Treatment of Skin Papillomas with Topical Alpha-Lactalbumin-Oleic Acid,” *New England Journal of Medicine* 350 (2004): 2663–2672.

Liz Laing, ACE, is a freelance writer and mother of four beautiful, breastfed children. She has been a stay-at-home mom for the past 12 years and most recently is overcoming the challenges of single motherhood. A certified childbirth educator and doula, Liz lives in Los Angeles, California.