

# The Miracle of Mother's Own Milk: Nurturing preterm infants to thrive

*Afif EL-Khuffash MD, DCE, IBCLC describes the unmatched benefits of a mum's milk for premature babies.*



◀ Afif El-Khuffash is also a digital artist. He has produced many fantastic breastfeeding images among his artwork.  
CREDIT: AFIF EL-KHUFFASH.

**W**elcoming a preterm infant into the world is a journey filled with challenges and hopes. For those babies, every ounce of nutrition counts, and as parents, we strive to give them the best possible start. While donor human milk (DHM) provides a valuable alternative, recent research shines a spotlight on the unmatched

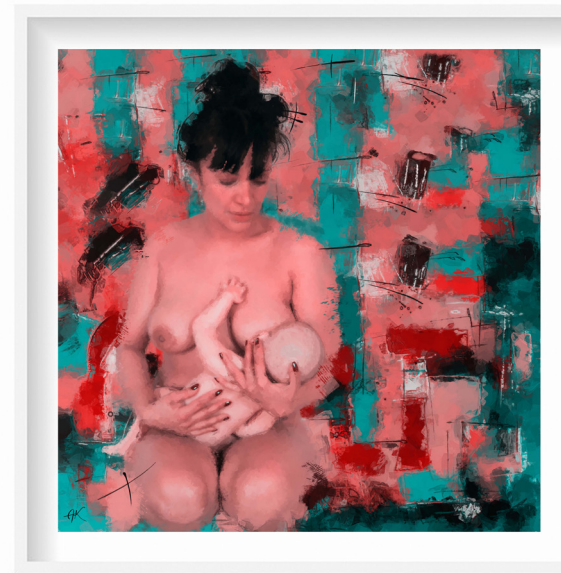
benefits of mother's own milk (MoM). Let's explore why MoM is considered the gold standard and how we can support its use in the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU).

## Guarding Against Necrotising Enterocolitis (NEC):

NEC is a daunting condition that affects the intestines of preterm infants, often with severe consequences. It is becoming increasingly evident that feeding preemies with exclusive human milk, particularly MoM, significantly cuts down the risk of NEC.

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## Boosting Brain Power:

Imagine if something as simple as your milk could help ensure your baby's cognitive and motor skills flourish. Studies have shown that preterm infants fed with MoM exhibit better neurodevelopmental outcomes by the age of two. It's a



compelling reason to treasure and support breastfeeding efforts from day one.

### Heart Health for Life:

The benefits of MoM extend far beyond the crib. A study performed by our research group

highlighted that infants who start life on MoM tend to have better cardiovascular health as they grow. Lower blood pressure and healthier arteries in adolescence can be traced back to those early feeds of mother's milk.

### The Living, Breathing Elixir

Breast milk isn't just food; it's a dynamic, living fluid that adapts to your baby's needs. Recent research reveals that MoM can change

its composition, boosting immune factors when your little one is under the weather. This remarkable adaptability gives your baby a tailor-made defence system, something

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DHM or formula simply can't match.

### Improving Donor Milk for Better Outcomes

When MoM isn't available, DHM is a lifesaver. However, to make it safe, it undergoes pasteurisation, which unfortunately strips away some beneficial elements like beneficial bacteria (probiotics), stem cells, lipase and certain immunoglobulins. The good news is that new methods, such as high-pressure processing (HPP), are being explored to preserve more of these essential components. It's a step forward in ensuring DHM is as close to the real thing as possible.

### Fortifying the Future

Preterm infants have special nutritional needs that even MoM might not fully meet. Enter human milk fortifiers, which add vital nutrients to the milk, promoting healthier growth, and reducing risks like NEC and sepsis. These fortifiers ensure our smallest babies get all they need to grow strong.





### Supporting Mothers in the NICU

To maximise the benefits of MoM, a

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supportive environment in the NICU is crucial. Here are some proven strategies:

- Immediate Skin-to-Skin Contact: Holding your baby right after birth and delaying cord clamping can significantly help in starting breastfeeding.

- Lactation Support: Comprehensive programs, including tele-lactation services, have been shown to boost breastfeeding success and milk supply.

- Empowered NICU Staff: Training staff to support breastfeeding, providing efficient pumps, and encouraging early hand expression can make all the difference.

- Parental Involvement:

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### Looking Ahead

The future is bright with ongoing research aimed at comparing the benefits of fresh versus frozen MoM and the differences between preterm and term donor milk. These studies promise to provide clearer guidelines and further improve the care we offer to our tiniest patients.

### Conclusion

Mother’s own milk is more than just nutrition; it’s a lifeline filled with unique, dynamic benefits that DHM and formula cannot replicate.

By supporting breastfeeding efforts and embracing advancements in milk processing and fortification, we can give preterm infants the best possible start. As parents, advocating for the use of MoM can make a world of difference in your child’s health and development.

In this journey, every drop of mother’s milk is a testament to the strength and resilience of both mother and child. Let’s continue to support and celebrate the miraculous power of MoM, helping our little fighters grow into healthy, thriving children. 

● Follow Afif on Instagram (@afif.elkhuffash)

### About the author

Afif EL-Khuffash MD, DCE, IBCLC is a Consultant Neonatologist and Paediatrician from Ireland. He holds several qualifications. His expertise spans two primary clinical and research areas: heart function in neonates and breastfeeding promotion and support for new mothers. He is also a celebrated digital artist.

