

Breast/Chestfeeding 201: Donor Milk & Islam

Learn more about the Islamic perspectives on donor milk and kinship.



Introduction

There are many considerations when it comes to a parent's decision regarding their infant's nutrition. For information regarding different options for infant nutrition (chestfeeding vs. donor milk vs. formula), please see HEART's [blog](#) and resource library.

Donor Milk and Islam

Prophet Muhammad (SAW) was himself cared for by a wetnurse, Halima (RA), for the first four years of his life. In pre-Islamic Arab societies, it was customary for infants to be sent to the desert and to be chestfed by wetnurses to grow strong and learn Arabic. As such, the Prophet (SAW) grew a close relationship with Halima (RA) and considered her to be a mother to him. The story of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) and Halima (RA) serves as an example of the Islamic tradition of the use of donor milk and the role of wetnurses for infant nutrition.

The Question of Milk Siblings & Establishing Kinship

There are some considerations that Muslims may have regarding the use of donor milk, especially when the milk donor is anonymous. The various Islamic schools of thought have different rulings on what conditions would make two individuals milk siblings with one another. Milk siblings are two people that were nursed by the same person, regardless of their biological relationship to that wet nurse. This is based on the idea that when a child is nursed by someone, they establish a form of kinship. Therefore, two people may not be biologically related but they might have formed the same type of kinship with a wet nurse, making them milk siblings.

Some Islamic schools of thought say that it only takes one suckling to establish kinship. Others say that it can take up to five or ten sucklings to establish this relationship. The implications of milk siblings is that Islam prohibits marriage between two people on the basis of blood or milk relation. Therefore, anonymous milk donation might complicate the ability to know later in life if two people are milk siblings (and if they are mahram) which might be important for some Muslims.

The question of whether donor milk establishes kinship is a complicated one. We invite you to ask questions with us such as: is kinship only established if the child is physically fed from the chest? What if the milk came from a milk bank and therefore the infant was not fed skin-to-skin? Is that still a form of kinship? In the case of anonymous donation, how do you form kinship with someone who's name, identity, and face nobody knows? And, similarly, if the donor does not know the child recipient of their milk, is there an established kinship relationship?

Contemporary Rulings

Health care professionals and birth workers in Minnesota expressed concern about a disparity in NICUs where premature infants were not receiving adequate nutrition. These concerns led to a dialogue between healthcare providers and Muslim leadership in Minnesota about the role of breastfeeding in infant nutrition, and the critical role it plays for premature infants. The result was a fatwa that not only permitted but encouraged the use of donor milk for infants when the biological parent's milk is not available.

Some Muslims have had and will continue to have lingering questions about whether donor milk establishes kinship and what future implications such kinship ties might have. The fatwa committee in Minnesota specifically states that in the case of donor milk, since donor milk is pooled from three to five sources, it is unlikely that the child will be fed a large amount of milk from a single source, reducing the chance of kinship being established.

Fatwa:

This fatwa is rooted in the ultimate goal of preserving life. The fatwa committee shared that:

“For some babies, human breast milk serves therapeutic/medicinal purposes and is preventing dangerous illnesses from forming in the baby's digestive system or gut, according to the Fatwa Committee's decision. Regardless of the donor's religious beliefs, the use of heat-treated donor milk for that specific reason aligns with Islamic Sharia's law goals, which prioritize the preservation of human life. Surah: Al-Ma'idah Ayah 32 “Whoever saves one-it is as if he had saved mankind entirely.”

This is a powerful example of how Islam can show us the way forward in difficult situations by grounding us in foundational Islamic principles, such as easing hardship and promoting the public benefit. For more information about this fatwa, including FAQs, please visit [Minnesota Milk Bank for Babies](#).”

Additional Resources

[Story of Halimah](#)

[Islamic Beliefs About Milk Kinship](#)

[Fatwa for donor milk](#)

We know there is no one way of being Muslim and practicing Islam. We hope that this resource provides a starting point of how different Islamic considerations might be interpreted or resolved for parents that are trying to find the best ways to care for their children within an Islamic framework.