

## Research Article

Knowledge and attitudes of breastfeeding mothers towards breast milk banking  
Emziren annelerin anne sütü bankacılığına karşı bilgi ve tutumlarıBahar Oztelcan Gunduz<sup>a</sup>, Coskun Firat Ozkececi<sup>b</sup>, Erman Atas<sup>c</sup>, Bulent Unay<sup>d</sup>, Halit Halil<sup>e</sup><sup>a</sup> Department of Pediatrics, Gulhane Training and Research Hospital, University of Health Sciences, Ankara, Türkiye<sup>b</sup> Division of Pediatric Gastroenterology, Gulhane Training and Research Hospital, University of Health Science, Ankara, Türkiye<sup>c</sup> Division of Pediatric Oncology, Gulhane Training and Research Hospital, University of Health Sciences, Ankara, Türkiye<sup>d</sup> Division of Pediatric Neurology, Gulhane Training and Research Hospital, University of Health Sciences, Ankara, Türkiye<sup>e</sup> Division of Pediatric Emergency Medicine, Dr. Sami Ulus Training and Research Hospital, University of Health Sciences, Ankara, Türkiye

## Abstract

**Introduction:** This research was conducted to determine the opinions of breastfeeding mothers regarding breast milk banking. The aim of this study was to investigate the attitudes of breastfeeding mothers towards breast milk banking and to determine the potential impact of education on increasing knowledge and awareness of breast milk donation.

**Methods:** The study was carried out with 303 breastfeeding mothers who presented to the healthy child and general pediatrics clinics between April 15, 2020 and September 1, 2020, for various reasons. After a brief information session on breast milk banking, a 20-question survey was conducted face-to-face with the mothers. The questions related to breast milk banking in the survey were prepared according to the literature. The first part of the survey included demographic questions about the mothers, and the second part included questions about breast milk banking.

**Results:** The mean age was found to be 32.6±5.9 years. 67.7% of the mothers had heard of breast milk banking before, while 73.6% did not know if there was a breast milk bank in Turkey. Additionally, 61.7% of the mothers had a positive view of donating breast milk, and 76.2% stated that they could give their milk to another baby if there was a need. As the education level of the mothers increased and the number of pregnancies exceeded three, the rates of those who considered donating breast milk and those who stated that they could use donor milk for their own children if necessary were found to be statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ).

**Conclusion:** As the education levels and number of pregnancies of the participating mothers increased, the rates of those considering donating breast milk also increased. The most significant difference of our study compared to other similar studies is that, with the brief information provided to the mothers during the study, their knowledge and awareness increased, and they indicated that they could donate their milk to breast milk banks and use donor milk for their own children when necessary. Providing education to mothers about breast milk banks in our country can have a positive impact on establishing breast milk banks. In addition, it is believed that increasing women's education levels is important not only for their own babies but also for providing milk to all high-risk babies in the society.

**Keywords:** Breast Feeding; Health Knowledge, Attitudes, Practice; Infant; Milk Banks; Human Milk

## Öz

**Giriş:** Bu araştırma, emziren annelerin anne sütü bankacılığına ilişkin görüşlerini belirlemek amacıyla yapılmıştır. Bu çalışmanın amacı, emziren annelerin anne sütü bankacılığına yönelik tutumlarını araştırmak ve anne sütü bağışi konusunda bilgi ve farkındalığı artırmada eğitimin potansiyel etkisini belirlemektir.

**Yöntem:** Çalışma 15 Nisan 2020 – 1 Eylül 2020 tarihleri arasında sağlam çocuk polikliniği ve genel pediatri polikliniğine çeşitli sebepler ile başvuran 303 emziren anneyle yapıldı. Annelere anne sütü bankacılığı hakkında kısa bir bilgilendirme yapıldıktan sonra yüz yüze 20 soruluk anket uygulandı. Ankette yer alan anne sütü bankacılığı ile ilgili sorular literatüre uygun olarak hazırlandı. Anketin ilk bölümünde annelere ait demografik sorulara; ikinci bölümde ise anne sütü bankacılığına ilişkin sorulara yer verildi.

**Bulgular:** Ortalama yaş 32,6±5,9 yıl olarak bulundu. Annelerin %67,7'si anne sütü bankasını daha önce duymuşlardı, %73,6'sı ise Türkiye'de anne sütü bankası olup olmadığını bilmemekteydi. Aynı zamanda annelerin %61,7'si anne sütü bağışi fikrine olumlu olarak bakmaktaydı ve %76,2'si ise ihtiyaç olması halinde başka bir bebeğe sütünü verebileceğini belirtti. Annelerin eğitim seviyeleri arttıkça ve gebelik sayısı 3'ten fazla olan annelerde anne sütü bağışlama düşüncesine ve gerektiği hallerde kendi çocukları içinde donör süt kullanabileceklerini belirtme oranları istatistiksel olarak anlamlı düzeyde bulundu ( $p < 0,05$ ).

**Sonuç:** Çalışmaya katılan annelerin eğitim düzeyleri yükseldikçe ve gebelik sayısı arttıkça anne sütü bağışlamayı düşünenlerin oranları artmıştır. Çalışma sırasında annelere verilen kısa bir bilgilendirme ile annelerin bilgilerinin ve farkındalıklarının artması ile anne sütü bankalarına sütlerini bağışlayabileceklerini ve uygun hallerde kendi çocukları içinde kullanabileceklerini belirtmeleri diğer benzer çalışmalara göre çalışmamızı ayıran en önemli farktır. Anne sütü bankaları hakkında annelere eğitim verilmesi ülkemizde anne sütü bankalarının kurulabilmesi için olumlu bir etki yaratabilir. Ayrıca kadınların eğitim seviyelerini arttırmamız; sadece kendi bebekleri için değil, toplumdaki yüksek riskli tüm bebeklere süt sağlanabilmesi açısından önemli olduğu düşünülmektedir.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Emzirme; Sağlık Bilgisi, Tutum, Uygulama; Bebek; Süt Bankaları; İnsan Sütü

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## Key Points

1. The majority of participants had positive attitudes toward milk donation and were willing to donate their breastmilk to any baby in need, including to human milk banks.
2. A significant proportion of participants had heard of human milk banks, but many were unsure whether such banks existed in Turkey.
3. Education level and knowledge about human milk banks were found to be important factors in influencing participants' views on breastmilk donation to human milk banks.

## Introduction

Breastmilk is the first and greatest gift a mother gives her baby. The short- and long-term medical and neurodevelopmental advantages of breastfeeding have made breastfeeding and access to breastmilk a public health necessity. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends exclusive breastmilk consumption for about the first 6 months of the postpartum period. Additionally, the AAP also supports the continuation of breastfeeding along with appropriate supplementary foods to be provided after about 6 months until the age of 2 years or older as long as both the mother and the baby are willing. According to the Turkey Population and Health Survey (TNSA) 2018 data, breastfeeding continued up to the age of 1 year in 66% of babies in Turkey, while more than half (53%) of children under the age of 2 were breastfed based on the requirements of their age [1]. The reasons for babies not being breastfed include preterm birth, low birth weight, bowel problems, food intolerance, undeveloped sucking reflex, severe allergy in the baby, lack of social support, and baby- and mother-related factors that prevent the mother and the baby from being together [2]. In such conditions, the best alternative to breastmilk is donated breastmilk. Human milk banks can provide babies with breastmilk when needed by providing the necessary ethical conditions. By 2019, there were more than 300 human milk banks in 38 countries in the world [3]. However, there are no human milk banks in Turkey, and instead, the concept of a wetnurse is culturally more prevalent. In this study, it was aimed to investigate the views of mothers on human milk banks and determine barriers to the establishment of human milk banks in Turkey.

## Methods

This descriptive study was carried out between 15 April 2020 and 1 September 2020 at the well-child and general pediatrics departments of our hospital. The population of the study included breastfeeding mothers (n: 303). Our hospital is located in an area where the rate of people with university or higher degrees is 19% [4]. In the sample size calculation process, considering a previous study that was conducted in Turkey which revealed a wet nursing prevalence of 20% [5], the minimum required sample size for our study was found as 250 participants. Our study included 303 mothers. A questionnaire consisting of 20 questions was used for this study. The first part included questions on the sociodemographic characteristics of the participants, while the second part included questions on their knowledge and views about human milk banks. Before starting the implementation of the questionnaire, the participants were informed about human milk banks and their functions. The questions were evaluated with a pilot study before the implementation of the main study, and the final version of the questionnaire was created. The questions were designed to collect information on the participants' age, education status, working status, numbers of pregnancies, gestational weeks in which their currently breastfed babies were born, their family type, marital status, whether they breastfed their children, whether they had a history of children who were hospitalized in the neonatal intensive care unit, whether they experienced a situation in which they were unable to provide breastmilk for any reason, their demographic characteristics, and other information on breastfeeding. The questions regarding their knowledge and views on human milk banks consisted of the open-ended questions "What is a human milk bank?", "What does it do?", "Do you know whether there is a human milk bank in Turkey?", "Would you like there to be a human milk bank in Turkey?", "Would you donate your milk if there were human milk banks in Turkey?", "What are your views about a mother's donation of her milk to other babies in need?", "What disadvantages can there be regarding the donation of one's breastmilk to other babies in need?", and "Would you give the breastmilk of another mother to your baby in case your baby needed it?"

## Ethical approval, informed consent and permissions

Approval was obtained from the "Scientific Research Ethics Committee" of our hospital (2020-117) to conduct the study. Permissions were obtained from the hospital and departments where this study would be conducted, and all mothers who participated in the study provided consent before their inclusion.

## Statistical Analysis

The data were analyzed using the SPSS 22.0 Software for Windows (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA). Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages of sociodemographic variables, statistics for responses to questions on breastfeeding, breastmilk sharing, and human milk banks) were calculated. For identifying the significance of the differences between groups (age group, education status, working status, place of residence, type of family), univariate and multivariate logistic regression analyses were carried out.  $p < 0.05$  was accepted as statistically significant.

## Results

The mean age of the participants was  $32.6 \pm 5.9$ . Additionally, 81.2% (n: 246) of the participants were in the age group of 19-36, and 18.8% were older than 37 (min: 19, max: 57). While 76.9% of the participants had university or higher degrees, 23.1% had high school, middle school, or primary school education. Working participants constituted 65.3% of the sample, while 34.7% of the participants were not working. Moreover, 88.1% had fewer than 3 children, and 11.9% had 3 or more children. While 12.5% of the participants had preterm deliveries, 87.5% had term deliveries. It was stated by 98.7% of the participants that they breastfed their babies, and 1.3% said they could not breastfeed their babies due to various reasons (Table 1).

It was found that 67.7% of the participants had heard of human milk banks, while 73.6% said they did not know whether there were human milk banks in Turkey. Positive attitudes toward milk donation were seen in 61.7% of the participants, and 82.5% of the participants stated that they could donate their breastmilk to any baby in need. When they were asked whether they would donate their breastmilk to a human milk bank, 61.7%

of the participants said they would, 20.1% said they would not, and 18.2% were undecided. To the question about to whom a mother could donate her breastmilk, 4.6% said they could only give it to their relatives, 82.5% stated that they could give it to any child in need, and 12.9% reported that they could only give it to those with the same sex as their child (Table 1).

When they were asked about whether human milk banks are objectionable in religion, 47.1% found them not objectionable, 25.7% found them objectionable, and 27.3% stated that they did not have complete knowledge of the issue. While 67.4% of the participants thought the child receiving their donated breastmilk and their own child would be milk siblings, 32.6% thought they would not be milk siblings because they would not directly breastfeed the other child. Considering whether this possibility could lead to problems regarding marriage in the future, 37.3% of the participants responded as “no”, while 39.9% responded as “yes” and 22.8% were undecided. When they were asked whether they would give their child breastmilk from a human milk bank in the case that they were unable to breastfeed, 26.1% of the participants said “no”, 38.9% said “yes”, and 35% were undecided (Table 1).

According to the results of the univariate and multivariate analyses, having a high education level (OR = 8.95% CI [1.3-47],  $p = 0.020$ ), having knowledge of human milk banks (OR = 13.8 95% CI [3.6-5.3],  $p < 0.001$ ), and having had 3 or more pregnancies (OR = 5.3 95% CI [0.85-33.1],  $p = 0.070$ ) affected the views of the participants on breastmilk donation to human milk banks positively (Table 2).

**Table 1.** Demographic characteristics of mothers and survey questions

Features	Category	n (303)	%
Age of mother (year)	19-25	33	10.9
	26 – 36	213	70.3
	≥ 37	57	18.8
Education status of mother	university (bachelor, doctorate)	233	76.9
	High school and below	70	23.1
Working status of mother	Not working	105	34.7
	Working	198	65.3
Number of pregnancies	<3	267	88.1
	≥3	36	11.9
Gestation of baby at birth (week)	Preterm ≤37	38	12.5
	Term >38	265	87.5
Survey Questions	Answers	n	%
Breastfeeding	No	4	1.3
	Yes	299	98.7
Situation for never breastfeeding in anytime	No	245	80.9
	Yes	58	19.1
Marital status	Married	297	98
	Single	4	2
Type of family	Nuclear	25	8.3
	Extended	278	91.7
Has your baby been in intensive care?	Yes	55	18.2
	No	248	81.8
What is a milk bank, what does it do?	I know	98	67.7
	I don't know	205	32.3
Is there a milk bank in Turkey?	Yes	22	7.3
	No	281	92.7
Would you donate your own milk to the milk bank?	Yes	187	61.7
	No	61	20.1
	Be in two minds	55	18.2
Who can a mother give her own milk to?	Every child in need	250	82.5
	to relatives	14	4.6
	only same sex	39	12.9
Do you think a human milk bank is religiously objectionable?	Yes	78	25.7
	No	143	47.1
Do you need a human milk bank in Turkey?	No idea	83	27.3
	Yes	263	86.8
Would you give another mother's milk to your child in case of need?	No	40	13.2
	Yes	118	38.9
	No	79	26.1
Does the milk taken from the milk bank cause problems in terms of marriage in the future?	Be in two minds	106	35
	Yes	121	39.9
	No	113	37.3
Will the child you give your human milk to become your child's foster-brother/sister?	No idea	69	37.3
	Yes	205	67.4
	No	35	11.5
	No idea	64	21.1

**Table 2.** Factors affecting positively the establishment of breast milk bank

Parameters	Category	Univariate analysis			Multivariate analysis		
		OR	p	CI %95	OR	p	CI %95
Education status of mother	University/Others	2.8	0.054	0.7-8.3	8	0.020	1.3-47
Would you give someone else's milk to your child?	Yes / No	3.8	0.001	1.7-8.4			
Any information about human milk bank	Yes / No	4.6	<0.001	2.2-9.4	13.8	<0.001	3.6-5.3
Number of pregnancy	≥3 / 1-2	3.1	0.007	1.3-7.1	5.3	0.070	0.85-33.1

Logistic Regression \*OR: odds ratio, CI: confidence interval

## Discussion

Breastmilk is a food that has vital importance for a baby. Even the contents of the breastmilk of mothers of preterm and term babies are different, and they vary based on the needs of the baby. However, in some cases, babies might be unable to receive breastmilk. These cases differ based on both mother- and baby-related factors. In this case, the most suitable option is donated breastmilk. Although there is no human milk bank in Turkey, the concept of wet nursing attracts more acceptance. One of the significant reasons for this is the importance of milk siblinghood in the religion of Islam. For this reason, in this study, we investigated the attitudes and behaviors of breastfeeding mothers regarding human milk banks. Other studies conducted in Turkey reported the ages of mothers as 29.9±6.3, 25-50, 19-34 and over 35, and 28.3±6.4 [6-9], and these values were similar to those found in our study. The reason for these results may be the high fertility rates in women in this age group and the coverage of these women in such studies. While previous studies reported the rates of mothers with university degrees as 15.8%, 22%, and 16.3% [7,8,10], 76.9% of the mothers who participated in our study were university graduates, and this rate was much higher than those in other studies conducted in Turkey. The reason for this difference may be the fact that our study was a cross-sectional study, the education levels of mothers in the region where our study was conducted are high, and the education levels of mothers who regularly bring their children to well-child outpatient clinics are high. The increasing rates of women in education in Turkey may also have been a factor. In a similar study that was carried out at a different hospital in Ankara, the rate of mothers with university or higher degrees was reported as 16.7% [9]. This difference may be related to the different sample sizes and differences in education-related factors between regions. The rate of working mothers in our study was 65.3%, while other studies in Turkey reported these rates as 22.4% [8], 16% [9], 21.5% [7], 25.4% [6], 6.8% [10], 11.8% [11], and 42.9% [12]. The interest of the media in sharing breastmilk has increased in the last half of this century. Initiatives for human milk banks in Turkey were announced more prevalently by the media as they are a novel practice. The positive views of the mothers who participated in our study, which was conducted in a region with high numbers of full-time and part-time working mothers, on human milk banks may be explained by the possibility that their levels of awareness regarding breastmilk and human milk banks were high. In our study, it was found that mothers who had three or more than three children (11.9%) viewed human milk banks more positively and were more willing and eager to share their breastmilk. These results may be explained by the possibility that mothers are inexperienced when they have their first childbirth experience, they have concerns that their breastmilk could be insufficient, they are more confident while they are breastfeeding their second and third children, and their experience in breastfeeding increases. In our study, the majority of the mothers (67.7%) stated that they had heard of human milk banks, while 73.6% did not know whether there were human milk banks in Turkey. The rates of mothers who stated that they had heard of human milk banks were reported as 30.7% in a study that was conducted in Zonguldak, 28.4% in a study that was conducted in Eskişehir, and 4.9% in another study conducted in Ankara. The same rate was reported by Yılmaz et al. as 79.8%, Şahin as 56.4%, and Ekşioglu et al. as 68.8% [7, 8, 13]. We believe that this rate was high in our study because the participants were informed about human milk banks and breastmilk donation before they started to respond to the questionnaire, their education levels were generally high, our study was conducted in Ankara, which is the capital of Turkey with better opportunities compared to other cities in the country, and this issue has been covered on the media more frequently in recent times. After they were informed about human milk banks, more than half of the mothers who participated in our study stated that they had positive thoughts about human milk banks being established in Turkey, and they would be willing to donate their own milk to every baby in need under appropriate conditions. The mothers said they thought donating their milk to another baby in need is like donating blood. They shared their view that they could do this under suitable conditions.

It was found in our study that more than half of the participants would donate their breastmilk to human milk banks, 76% could give their breastmilk to any child in need, 46.9% did not find the concept objectionable in the religious sense, 67.7% thought their children and the children who would receive their donated breastmilk would be milk siblings, and 62.7% said this situation could pose a problem for marriage in the future in the religious context. Approximately half of the mothers who participated in our study stated that they could accept breastmilk from a human milk bank and give it to their children in case they were unable to breastfeed their children. Similar studies carried out in Turkey have reported highly prevalent views that human milk banks are objectionable in terms of religious beliefs because it is known that marriage between milk siblings is prohibited in Islam [7, 8, 11, 12]. According to Islam, the children of the mother who gives her breastmilk to the children of others are not allowed to marry the children who receive this donated milk. In fact, breastfeeding and giving/receiving breastmilk are highly important among Muslims. The main concern is that the donor and recipient families know each other, and thus, problems that could arise in the future regarding marriage are prevented. The recipient baby is accepted as a child of the donor. Marriage between this baby and the biological child of the donor is prohibited. Moreover, in a similar study that was carried out in Zonguldak [6], the participants stated that they did not consider human milk banks questionable in terms of religious beliefs, they thought breastmilk that is medically inspected can be given to babies of the same sex as the donating mother's child, and they did not believe receiving breastmilk from or donating breastmilk to human milk banks is a sin. In our study, approximately half of the participants, who were breastfeeding mothers, stated that they did not see human milk banks objectionable in terms of religion. This may be because it is known that breastmilk is a food that is not only highly beneficial but also irreplaceable for a baby, and it is thought that such behavior as breastmilk donation can be performed with the instinct of solidarity. The main sources of hesitancy related to breastmilk donation include religious reasons and fears of contagion and infection [5, 7, 14]. In our study, the greatest concern about human milk banks was religious reasons. The prohibition of marriage between milk siblings in Islam created concerns among the mothers. In Australia, most mothers stated that they would use donated breastmilk for their babies if they were sure of its safety and usability [15], whereas objection to the establishment of human milk

banks was observed in the study conducted in Kenya by Kimani-Murage et al. [16]. The main reason for this objection was HIV and diseases that can be transmitted via breastmilk.

The most important result in our study was that the support of the mothers for human milk banks would increase when their education levels and levels of knowledge and awareness of milk banks increased. Considering these results, it may be stated that education level is important in the establishment and operation of human milk banks. In addition to these results, it was found in our study that as the number of childbirths experienced by the mothers increased, they adopted more positive views about donating to human milk banks (Table 2). The reason for this may be that their breastfeeding-related experience increased, they wanted to achieve the right and sufficient nutrition of their children, and they were willing to contribute to those who are in need with their breastmilk.

## Limitations

We acknowledge that the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated restrictions during the study period might have affected the number of patients attending our outpatient clinic, potentially limiting the generalizability of our findings. Moreover, while we focused on mothers' perspectives, it would be valuable to explore fathers' knowledge, attitudes, and opinions regarding human milk banks as well.

## Conclusion

As the most important result of this study, it was observed that when the mothers were informed about the operation and importance of human milk banks, they adopted positive views about human milk banks, those with higher education levels had positive opinions about human milk banks, and those who had three or more children were more willing to share their breastmilk with the babies of others. Efforts should be spent to bring breastmilk, which is the ideal food for babies, to newborns who need it via human milk banks in a healthy manner and implement human milk bank operations in Turkey.

**Conflict of interest:** None

	Author Contributions	Author Initials
SCD	Study Conception and Design	BOG, HH
AD	Acquisition of Data	BOG, CFO, BU
AID	Analysis and Interpretation of Data	EA, BOG, CFO
DM	Drafting of Manuscript	BOG, EA, BU, HH, CFO
CR	Critical Revision	BOG, EA, HH, BU

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