



Why Is the TSA So Bad at Handling Breast Milk?

By Sarika Chawla

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Frozen breast milk. Photo via Flickr user [Bart Everson](#)

Nicole, a Portland, Oregon–based account director for a health company, flies frequently enough for work that she has the security procedure down to a science. She's also the mother of a baby boy, and because she's often away for a few days at a time, she travels with a breast pump and keeps the milk in dedicated storage bags, tucked in a cooler that she typically checks through to her final destination.

But before a recent cross-country flight back home, the configuration of Newark Liberty International Airport delivered her straight to

the security level after dropping off her rental car. So she kept her cooler full of pumped breast milk in her carry-on bag and lugged it through security.

She went through her usual routine, asking if she needed to take out her breast pump (she did not) and declaring all of her liquids to the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) agent. She expresses about 26 ounces a day and was carrying two-and-a-half days' worth of breast milk. When the agents held the bag for a manual security check and scan, it set off additional alarms.

"And that's when they called the bomb squad," she said.

When the TSA introduced its "3-1-1 rule" in 2006, limiting the amount of liquids allowed on board, medications and breast milk were exempt. But per its **guidelines**, the TSA may use "random and unpredictable security measures" at officers' discretion, which can lead to mishandling of breast milk, breast pumps, and other items with traveling mothers.

The process of searching Nicole took nearly 45 minutes, involving a full pat-down inspection by a TSA agent, and two bomb specialists who manually inspected and photographed each of her items. The hold-up in security caused her to miss her flight.

In another case, Sapna McCarthy, a Bay Area–based human resources consultant returning home from a two-day business trip, told me her breast milk passed through airport security at Los Angeles International Airport—but her freezer packs were confiscated for being partially thawed.

"The more questions I asked, they just said it was policy and refused to discuss it with me or get a manager," McCarthy said. Instead, she was told to collect ice from a coffee shop in the terminal to keep her breast milk cool, which she had to replenish repeatedly as her hour-long flight was delayed by several hours.

A TSA spokesman told me the agency "provides regular training and updates to personnel regarding screening of liquids and gels, including breast milk" in order to "avoid discrepancies in screening experience."

But it's these very discrepancies that often frustrate mothers traveling with breastfeeding supplies. In McCarthy's case, the TSA's **website** clearly says that if gel packs and other accessories are "partly frozen or slushy," they are subject to additional screening, not immediate confiscation.

In 2012, passenger Amy Strand was held up at security because she had ice packs for her breast milk, but her milk bottles were empty. An agent informed her that she could not travel with the ice packs unless it was accompanied by breast milk and directed her to a public restroom to pump into the bottles before she was allowed through. (**The TSA later issued an apology.**) Recently, at Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport, passenger Katie Champ claims she was **harassed by airport employees** who had her lift her shirt during a pat-down procedure and told her she shouldn't have brought breast milk to security if she didn't want to undergo additional screening.

On another recent flight out of Portland, Nicole—the woman whose breast milk set off the bomb squad—was stopped in security to have her breast pump examined, which involved a TSA agent fully disassembling the pump. She was eventually cleared, but when she boarded her cross-country flight, she discovered that the pump was totally inoperable.

Several other women have shared with me their stories of random manual inspections of breast milk and formula, including gloved hands, swabs, and litmus paper—unsettling to any parent who spends hours sterilizing bottles and pump parts to avoid contamination.

While it's not always made clear, according to the TSA's rules, technically only the passenger can open and close bottles; should you prefer not to have the milk examined, you can request alternate screenings such as an enhanced pat-down and bag inspections (to some, a puzzling solution to the potential threats posed by liquids).

Most policies regarding breast milk, formula, and the screening options available to passengers are detailed on the [TSA's website](#), in part thanks to Stacey Armato, a Hermosa Beach-based attorney who sued the federal agency after being "harassed and abused by TSA agents" in 2010.

At the time, Armato was traveling weekly for work between Phoenix and Los Angeles, and she explained she was "getting a lot of infections because [she] would travel and not pump all day." Her doctor warned her she could lose her milk supply altogether if she didn't start pumping, so Armato started bringing a breast pump on her trips. Uncomfortable with the idea of running her breast milk through the X-ray machine, she came armed with a printout of the TSA's official policy, which stated she could request an alternate screening for the milk.

She made it through security without problems the first few flights, until one trip she was stopped in the security line. According to the [complaint](#) later filed against the TSA, she was held up for 40 minutes and subjected to repeated inspections "for not simply 'pumping and dumping' her breast milk." Finally, "the TSA permitted her to pass through security with the 'alternate screening' process for her breast milk."

But when she got on a flight the following week, Armato encountered the same agents at the checkpoint, who stopped her and held her in a glassed-off area for about 40 minutes.

"They were telling me to be quiet if I knew what was good for me—that my milk was going to get thrown out," she told me. After about half an hour, she burst into tears, which led agents to summon the Phoenix police. "The police officer said they were called because I was out of control—that I was crying too much."

The amount each woman can get in one pumping session varies drastically, some collecting only enough for the next feeding—so Armato didn't want to just "pump and dump," as the TSA agents had originally suggested. "People don't know how much effort it takes to get that milk, and I was a day-to-day pumper," she explained. "The milk was for my son to drink the next day."

Armato filed a formal lawsuit against the federal agency in 2011, and four years later, the TSA settled the case to the tune of \$75,000, along with an agreement to retrain its officers on proper breast milk-screening procedures and to clarify the language on its website.

"I felt like that was a bigger victory," Armato said. "If it went to court, we couldn't be guaranteed that they would retrain their employees; we expect them to follow the rule in every other arena, so why not this one?"

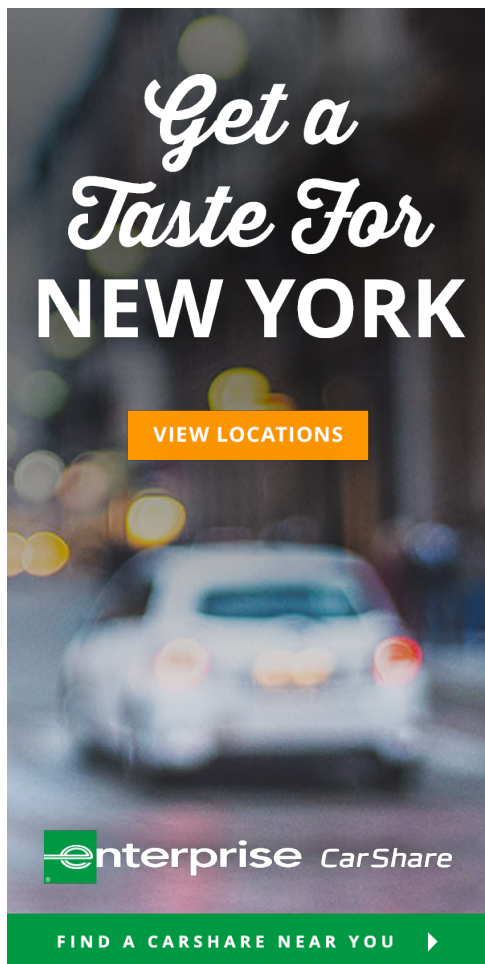
But even the most clearly spelled-out rules aren't always followed or are interpreted differently among agents.

"I think there's still a training issue," Nicole said. "Frankly, I believe they don't think it's important to be trained—nationwide—on how to deal with women's breast milk and breast pumps adequately, and I find that really upsetting."

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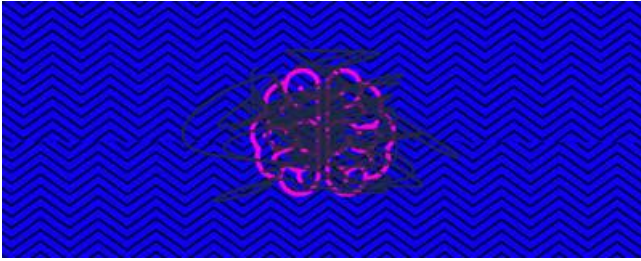
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