

# The Benefits of Breastfeeding<sup>1</sup>

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So, you'll soon be a new mom. Congratulations! By researching breastfeeding, it is obvious that you want the best nutrition for your baby. Experts agree that breast milk is the best food for your baby for the first six months of life. Breastfeeding is a healthy choice that offers many benefits for both you and your baby. Breast milk is an excellent source of nutrients and antibodies for your baby's health, and breastfeeding helps to create a strong bond between mother and child. It may also help you more easily lose weight gained during pregnancy and reduce your chance of developing common diseases like diabetes and breast and ovarian cancer. Breastfeeding is also economical, convenient, and natural. Read on to learn more about why breastfeeding is a great choice for you and your baby.

## Breastfeeding for Health

Experts recommend that you breastfeed exclusively for the first six months of your baby's life. Breastfeeding exclusively means feeding only breast milk to your baby, with no other liquids or solids except for medicine and vitamin or mineral supplements. From 6 to 12 months of age, experts recommend that you continue breastfeeding while gradually adding solid foods such as mashed vegetables and fruits and infant cereals.

## Why is breast milk best?

Breast milk is the best food for your baby because it includes all of the nutrients your baby needs in forms that are easy for her to digest. The milk a mother makes during



Figure 1. Breastfeeding benefits mother and baby.  
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the first few days after birth is called colostrum. Colostrum is very special because it provides your baby with just the right nutrients and contains lots of antibodies, too. Antibodies provide natural immunity for your baby and help to protect her against harmful bacteria and viruses. About four days after birth, "mature milk" begins to replace colostrum. Mature milk provides the same nutrients as colostrum but in greater amounts. Mature milk continues

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to provide your baby with disease-fighting agents making it an ideal food for her. Think of breast milk as a “customized” source of nutrients for your baby that works to keep her healthy so she can grow and develop at just the right pace.

## The Benefits of Breastfeeding

The benefits of breastfeeding for infants and their mothers have been studied for years. Below is a summary of some of these benefits.

### Benefits for your baby

Infants who are breastfed exclusively have a lower risk for allergies, diarrhea, and childhood and adult diseases. Infants who are breastfed for the first three months of life are less likely to have ear infections, too. Exclusive breastfeeding is also linked with a lower risk for Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) and childhood leukemia. Later in life as adults, breastfed infants score higher on IQ tests and have a lower risk for high blood pressure, high cholesterol, overweight/obesity, and type 2 diabetes.



Figure 2. Breastfeeding can also nourish the senses.  
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### Benefits for you

Moms who breastfeed also have positive health outcomes, including decreased risk for certain types of cancer, joint problems, and the occurrence of type 2 diabetes. Many studies have shown that the longer women breastfeed, the lower their risk for development of breast and ovarian cancer later in life. Women who breastfeed also lose weight

more quickly. In addition, they are less likely to become depressed after their baby is born and report better sleeping habits than women who do not breastfeed.

Breastfeeding exclusively usually stops a woman's monthly cycle. This makes it unlikely that she will become pregnant during this time. Not having a monthly cycle helps to ensure that breastfeeding mothers have enough iron to make breast milk without becoming iron deficient. It also helps to increase the time between pregnancies. However, some women have become pregnant while breastfeeding, **so relying on breastfeeding as your only form of birth control is not a good idea.** If you do not want to have another baby right away, discuss birth control options with your partner and/or healthcare provider.

### Other benefits

Positive health outcomes are not the only advantages of breastfeeding your baby. The skin-to-skin contact experienced during breastfeeding facilitates a strong bond between you and your child.

Breastfeeding can save you time and money, too. Breastfeeding is cheaper than formula feeding. There is no need to purchase formula, and because of the health benefits listed above, it is likely that you will spend less time and money at the doctor with a sick infant. It is estimated that breastfeeding your baby for one year can save you nearly \$1500! The savings continue to add up the longer you supplement your infant's diet with breast milk.

Breastfeeding is also convenient. Instead of stopping what you are doing to mix formula, you can feed right away. If your baby is hungry, you can feed her wherever you go. If you do not want people to see you, just bring a blanket to drape over your baby and your shoulder. You have every legal right to breastfeed in public.

### FAQs

Now that you know why breastfeeding is the best option for your baby, you may have questions about how to get started or where to find more information. This section will help make those answers clearer.

### What can I do to prepare for breastfeeding before my baby is born?

Breastfeeding information classes are often provided at no cost for low income women at your local Women, Infants and Children (WIC) office. Many hospitals or family planning centers also teach breastfeeding classes. A simple

phone call is all that is needed to find out where the class is and what time it starts. Make this a family event by bringing your partner and/or other family members. The more support you have at home, the more likely you are to stick with the decision to breastfeed your baby.

## Where can I find more information on how to breastfeed?

There are several resources available online. See the recommended websites section for a complete list of web addresses. If you do not have Internet access, you can call your local hospital, family planning clinic, or WIC office to ask for a list of resources in your area. Your public library is also a good place to find books on this topic or to use the Internet.

## Do I need a special diet while I am breastfeeding?

No. But since some of the nutrients and immune factors in your breast milk come from the foods you eat, it's important to make sure you are getting proper nutrition. In fact, breastfeeding increases your need for calories as well as some vitamins and minerals and fluids. Making sure that you eat the recommended amounts of a variety of foods from each food group every day, and that you drink plenty of water too, is a great way to meet all the nutritional needs for you and your baby. For more information about what a varied diet includes, visit the *Daily Food Plans for Pregnancy and Breastfeeding* site at <http://www.choosemyplate.gov/mypyramidmoms/index.html>. If you are still worried about getting enough vitamins and minerals, talk to your doctor about taking a multivitamin and/or mineral supplement. Getting enough fluids is important, too. You should drink water any time you feel thirsty. If you have dark, smelly urine or hard, dry stools you may need extra fluids.

## Is it difficult to breastfeed?

Breastfeeding can be overwhelming for new mothers when they first get started. Most hospitals have breastfeeding experts called lactation consultants on staff to help new mothers start breastfeeding successfully. Most mothers have no problems breastfeeding their babies; however, some mothers develop tender nipples, mastitis (inflamed breasts), or low milk production. A lactation consultant or your doctor can help you manage these problems. You can also find good information online (see the recommended websites section at the end of this document for more information). If you cannot get in touch with your lactation consultant or doctor, try calling the National Breastfeeding Helpline (1-800-994-9662) to speak to a breastfeeding counselor

at no cost. This free service is available 24 hours a day, 7 days per week. If you experience difficulties, remember this—breastfeeding has been the method of feeding infants since ancient times. There is plenty of information available to help you work through any trouble you may experience.

## What if I am a working mother?

Moms who have to return to work can still feed breast milk exclusively. There are several options available. To help you decide what is best for you, you might want to talk to other moms to see what they have tried. If you don't know of someone who has breastfed while they were working, you can contact a breastfeeding support group to get ideas (see the *Recommended Websites* section of this document for more information). You might also want to discuss your plans with your employer so arrangements can be made. If you decide to continue breastfeeding while you are working, you can buy or rent a breast pump and store your milk in a refrigerator or freezer for use when your baby is with a caregiver. The milk that is saved can be put into a bottle for feeding. Experts recommend that you wait to use a bottle until after your baby is 3 weeks old to avoid nipple confusion (when a baby forgets how to nurse from a breast). To find information about the proper storage and handling of pumped breast milk, visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website listed in the *Recommended Websites* section. Some moms are able to have the baby's caregiver bring their infant to the workplace a few times during the day.

## Is it better for my baby if I feed both breast milk and formula?

This is a common belief among many moms, but feeding your baby breast milk and formula at the same time is not a good idea. Feeding formula instead of breast milk can decrease the amount of milk you produce. Also, although formula is meant to provide all the nutrients your baby needs, it isn't perfect. Feeding formula to your infant will not provide her with antibodies that help fight infection and protect your baby's health, and it costs more than breastfeeding.

## Can I breastfeed if I am sick?

Many women believe that they should not breastfeed while they are sick. However, viruses and bacteria that cause common illnesses such as colds, diarrhea, and the flu can't get into your milk supply. On top of that, the antibodies your immune system makes against those germs will be carried into your milk so your baby will be healthier! However,

if you have HIV or AIDS, active tuberculosis, or you use illegal drugs, breastfeeding is not recommended.

## Can medicines get passed on to my baby?

Most medicines can get into your milk, but only in small amounts so your baby is not affected. There are only a few medicines that should not be taken while breastfeeding. Talk to your baby's doctor or a lactation consultant to find out if a medicine is safe to use. Remember, herbal supplements count as medicines, too. The American Academy of Pediatrics has designed a short list of medicines to help you know which medicines are okay for use during breastfeeding. The list is available online at <http://www.kellymom.com/health/meds/aap-approved-meds.html>.

## Can I drink alcohol if I breastfeed?

Alcohol can pass through your breast milk to your baby, so if you drink alcohol, you should limit your intake to one serving per day. One serving is equal to: 5 ounces of wine, or 12 ounces of beer, or 8 ounces of malt liquor, or 1½ ounces of 80-proof liquor. If you choose to drink alcohol, consume it right after your infant eats and wait at least 2 hours before the baby's next feeding.

## How do I know if my baby is hungry?

One of the best ways to tell if your infant is hungry or full is by learning to recognize the signs. The early cues of hunger include when your baby smacks her lips together, sucks on her fingers or toys, moves around a lot, or looks for a nipple on someone who is holding her (this is called "rooting"). Crying is a late sign of hunger.

## How much does my baby need to eat?

Your baby's tummy is very small. A newborn can only digest about 1½ teaspoons at a time, about the size of a fresh cherry. By the time your baby is a week old, her tummy can hold nearly 2 ounces at a time, which is about the size of a walnut. This may not seem like very much compared to what you might have seen formula-fed babies being fed. However, infants fed formula from a bottle are often overfed. This is because infants are unable to control the flow from an artificial nipple. If the baby doesn't drink the whole bottle, whatever is leftover should be thrown away and is wasted.

## Do I need to give any supplements to my baby if I breastfeed?

Experts recommend that all breastfed infants be supplemented with 400 International Units (IU) of liquid vitamin D per day to prevent growth problems. It is extra important

to give a vitamin D supplement if your baby is protected from exposure to the sun, if she has dark skin, or if your vitamin D status is low. Supplements can be purchased from your local drug or grocery store. Supplements that have vitamin D3 are the most effective.

## What if I cannot produce enough milk for my baby?

If you find that you cannot produce enough milk for your baby, feeding breast milk is still an option. A human milk bank can provide donor milk to you if you get a prescription from your doctor. Donors are carefully screened and milk is pasteurized to ensure that your baby does not get sick from the milk. You can call your insurance company to see if donor milk is covered under your plan. If it isn't, you can work out a plan for paying for the milk through the milk bank. If your baby is in need of donor milk and the milk bank has a large supply of it, you will not be turned away. To find a milk donor bank in your area, visit the Human Milk Banking Association of North America (HMBANA) website at <http://www.hmbana.org/>. Never use milk purchased over the Internet or from a friend, though, because you cannot be sure that it is safe for your infant.

Suggestions that taking "a beer a day" or certain herbs can increase the amount of milk you can make may pique your interest; however, there is no scientific evidence to support these claims. If you decide to try one of these methods, it is best to talk to your doctor before doing so.

## Is it bad if I have to feed formula to my baby?

Absolutely not! Formula feeding can be convenient for some parents, and there are specific cases when you *should not* breastfeed: if your infant has galactosemia, or if you have HIV, AIDS, tuberculosis, or if you have been exposed to radiation or chemotherapy drugs. While infant formulas do not provide all of the same benefits as breast milk, they are an acceptable alternative.

## Summary

Breastfeeding is the best option for most healthy and pre-term babies. It is the only food that is "customized" to meet your infant's individual needs for development and growth through the first six months of life. Supplementing breast milk with other foods after that time for a year or more can provide many health benefits for you and your baby. Good luck!

## Learn More

To learn more about breastfeeding, contact a Cooperative Extension Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) Educator (look in the blue pages of your telephone book). Florida Extension offices are listed online by UF/IFAS at <http://solutionsforyourlife.ufl.edu/map>. For a referral to a registered dietitian (RD) in your area, you can call the Florida Dietetic Association at (850) 386-8850 or check the yellow pages of your phone book. You can also find a registered dietitian in your area by visiting the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics RD Finder at <http://www.eatright.org/programs/rdfinder/>.

## Recommended Websites

*Choose My Plate Daily Food Plans for Pregnancy and Breastfeeding* – <http://www.choosemyplate.gov/mypyramidmoms/index.html> – This website provides daily food plans and nutrition-related information for pregnant and breastfeeding women.

*The National Women's Health Information Center* – <http://www.womenshealth.gov/breastfeeding/> – Here you will find everything you need to know about breastfeeding, from step-by-step pictures that show you how to breastfeed, to tips on pumping and storing your breast milk safely. Information about the National Breastfeeding Hotline can be found here as well.

*La Leche League International* – <http://www.llli.org/> – This website has a great question and answer search engine, as well as forums for breastfeeding support from mothers across the world.

*Women, Infants and Children (WIC)* – <http://www.fns.usda.gov/wic/Contacts/cooralpha.htm> – This website lists contact information of Breastfeeding Coordinators for each state. This is a good resource for finding information about breastfeeding preparation classes, breast pump rentals, and WIC eligibility.

*Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)* – [http://www.cdc.gov/breastfeeding/recommendations/handling\\_breastmilk.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/breastfeeding/recommendations/handling_breastmilk.htm) – This website provides safety information for the pumping and storage of breast milk, as well as a handy chart that you can print out and refer to when needed.

*World Health Organization (WHO)* – <http://www.who.int/topics/breastfeeding/en> – This website provides a variety of information on breastfeeding, including a Q & A section, statistics, and informative publications.

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