

Breastfeeding: Benefits for your baby and you

You've probably already heard the message: when it comes to feeding your baby, "breast is best." Still, research shows that most women appreciate having detailed, scientific information on the benefits of breastfeeding and breast milk (mother's milk). Women who understood the benefits of breastfeeding were more than 5 times more likely to breastfeed for a longer period of time. This handout explains why.

Why is mother's milk special?

Mother's milk is uniquely valuable for babies' health. Store-bought infant formula provides nutrition, but only mother's milk:

- Contains antibodies, substances that help your baby resist disease
- Provides a perfect balance of nutrients to help your baby grow and develop
- Protects your baby against allergies and is easy to digest

The special qualities in mother's milk translate to better health for babies now and in the years to come.

What do I need to do next?

- 1 Decide if either breastfeeding or pumping will work for you and your baby.
- 2 Make a plan for fitting breastfeeding or pumping into your life.
- 3 Get help from a lactation consultant if needed.

What are the benefits?

Hundreds of scientific studies show that breastfeeding can benefit your child at every stage of life.

Short-term benefits

Compared to formula-fed babies, babies who receive mother's milk have been shown in studies to have:

- **Fewer ear infections:** 23 % fewer infections among babies who received mother's milk and 50 % fewer infections among those who received mother's milk for at least 3 months
- **Fewer lung infections and respiratory illnesses:** 27 % fewer infections during the months that the babies were breastfed, and 72 % fewer hospitalizations for breathing problems among babies who received mother's milk for more than 4 months
- **Less vomiting:** 64 % fewer episodes
- **Less diarrhea:** 53 % fewer hospital admissions related to diarrhea
- **Fewer infections in general and fewer trips to the hospital in their first year of life:** 30 % fewer hospitalizations during the months the babies received mother's milk
- **A smaller chance of death from SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome):** 36 % fewer deaths among the babies who received mother's milk and 50 % fewer deaths among babies breastfed for 1 month or more

Long-term benefits

Compared to formula-fed babies, babies who received mother's milk show higher intelligence and are less likely to:

- **Develop childhood leukemia:** 15 % to 19 % less likely
- **Develop asthma in childhood:** among babies exclusively breastfed for longer than 3 months, 27 % lower risk of asthma overall (40 % lower risk when there is a family history of asthma)
- **Develop type 1 or type 2 diabetes:** 19 % to 27 % lower risk for type 1 for infants receiving mother's milk for at least 3 months
- **Develop atopic dermatitis:** breastfed infants are 42 % less likely to have this chronic, itchy skin condition
- **Be overweight or obese as adults.**
- **Have allergies overall.**
- **Have high blood pressure and cholesterol levels throughout life.**

Benefits for preterm babies and those with certain health problems

Mother's milk is best for nearly all babies. For preterm babies and those with certain health problems, it can be especially helpful. In one study with babies in a hospital NICU (neonatal intensive care unit), feeding mother's milk was shown to:

- **Dramatically lower the risk of necrotizing** [NEK-ruh-tahyz-ing] **enterocolitis** [en-tuh-roh-koh-LAHY-tis]—also called **NED**—a dangerous intestinal condition often seen in babies in the NICU.
- **Help babies wean off IV nutrition** (nutrition given through a vein) more quickly.
- **Lower the number of hospital-acquired infections** by half.
- **Improve vision.**
- **Improve brain and learning test performance.**

Breastfeeding protects mothers too

Breastfeeding or providing expressed mothers milk protects mothers in both the short and long term by improving maternal health.

- **Breastfeeding is good for your health, too.** It helps protect bone health and helps your body recover from pregnancy. For example, breastfeeding moms tend to have less bleeding after delivery and find it easier to return to their pre-pregnancy weight. Breastfeeding also protects mothers by reducing their risk of autoimmune diseases like rheumatoid arthritis.
- **Fewer incidence of postpartum depression.** Women who breastfeed exclusively have lower rates of postpartum depression. There is also a correlation between postpartum depression and early weaning. Please discuss postpartum blues and any depression concerns with your healthcare provider to determine the best treatment options.

- **Fewer cases of breast and ovarian cancer.** Women who breastfeed have a reduced risk of breast cancer by over 4% for each 12 months of breastfeeding. More than 12 months of breastfeeding is associated with a 28 to 30% decrease in breast and ovarian cancer.
- **Improved metabolic health.** With at least 1 month of breastfeeding, there is a reduced risk of developing type 2 diabetes later in life. This risk decreases 4 to 12% for each year of breastfeeding in mothers who do not have a history of gestational diabetes. There is also a reduced risk of maternal obesity.
- **Improved cardiovascular health.** Every breastfeeding is associated with a reduced risk of up to 10% for development of coronary heart disease and stroke. There is a reduction of hypertension in women with a total breastfeeding of 12 to 23 months by up to 5.5% and a reduced risk of heart attack by up to 8.5%. The risk of hyperlipidemia (too much fat in the blood) is also significantly reduced in women with a total breastfeeding history of 12 to 23 months. Total breastfeeding of more than 23 months was associated with an 18% reduced risk of coronary heart disease and a 17% reduced risk of stroke.

Factors that boost the benefits

Several studies note that the benefits of breastfeeding are further increased by these 2 factors:

- 1 **Giving it time.** The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends breastfeeding for at least the first year of your baby's life. After the first year, breastfeeding should continue for as long as mother and baby wish.
- 2 **Feeding mother's milk exclusively at first.** The AP recommends that for the first 6 months, mother's milk should be the only food your baby receives. After 6 months, you may want to introduce other healthy foods and drinks as your baby's doctor suggests.

Of course, any amount of breastfeeding is healthy for your baby. But in general, the experts agree that more is better.

More benefits for you and your baby

Besides the health benefits for your baby, other factors may also affect your decision to begin or continue breastfeeding. Here are a few to consider:

- **It can make life easier.** It may take some time to feel comfortable with breastfeeding or pumping your milk. But once you settle into your new routine, you'll likely find that breastfeeding makes your life easier. (No middle-of-the-night trips to the store to buy formula, for one thing!) Your milk is always available when your baby's hungry.
- **Breastfeeding saves you money.** Infant formula can cost thousands of dollars a year. Even if you need to buy or rent a breast pump, giving mother's milk is far less expensive.
- **Breastfeeding is an easy way to share closeness.** Physical contact helps babies feel secure, warm, and comforted. It can help you feel calm and connected, too. Breastfeeding gives you and your baby lots of chances to enjoy these feelings together.

Where can I learn more?

For more information about the benefits of breastfeeding, visit healthychildren.org.



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