

Breastfeeding: Benefits for your baby and you

You've probably already heard the message: when it comes to feeding your baby, "breast is best." 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 and is easy to digest
- Protects your baby against allergies

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

What are the benefits?

Hundreds of scientific studies show that breastfeeding can benefit your child. The benefits can last long after you stop breastfeeding.

Short-term benefits

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

- **Fewer infections in general and fewer trips to the hospital** in their first year of life.
 - **Fewer ear infections:** Babies who received mother's milk for at least 3 months are only half as likely to have ear infections.
 - **Fewer lung infections and breathing problems:** Less than half as many babies who received mother's milk for more than 4 months are hospitalized for breathing problems.
- **Less vomiting.**

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 to fit breastfeeding or pumping into your life.
- 3 Get help from a lactation consultant if needed.

- **Less diarrhea:** There are about half as many hospital admissions related to diarrhea.
- **A smaller chance of death from SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome):** The risk is lower for babies who receive mother's milk and drops even more for breastfed babies—to half as many 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. They are also less likely to:

- **Develop childhood leukemia** [loo-KEE-mee-uh].
- **Develop childhood asthma.**
- **Develop type 1 or type 2 diabetes.**
- **Develop atopic** [ey-TOP-ik] **dermatitis** [dur-muh-TAHY-tis]: Breastfed infants are about half as likely to have this chronic, itchy skin condition.
- **Be overweight or obese** as adults.
- **Have allergies.**
- **Have high blood pressure and high 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 **NEC**—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.**

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 AAP 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:

- **Breastfeeding is good for your health, too.** It's linked to lower rates of postpartum depression, type 2 diabetes, breast cancer, and ovarian cancer. It also 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.
- **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](https://www.healthychildren.org).



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