



August is National Breastfeeding Month

Spread the word, encouragement, and support

Choosing whether to breastfeed or formula feed their baby is one of the biggest decisions expectant and new parents will make. A number of health organizations — including the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), the American Medical Association (AMA), and the World Health Organization (WHO) — recommend breastfeeding as the best choice for babies. Breastfeeding helps defend against infections, prevent allergies, and protect against a number of chronic conditions.

The AAP recommends that babies be breastfed exclusively for the first 6 months. Beyond that, breastfeeding is encouraged until at least 12 months, and longer if both the mother and baby are willing. Although experts believe breast milk is the best nutritional choice for infants, breastfeeding may not be possible for all women. For many, the decision to breastfeed or formula feed is based on their comfort level, lifestyle, and specific medical situations.

For mothers who are unable to breastfeed or who decide not to, infant formula is a healthy alternative. Formula provides babies with the nutrients they need to grow and thrive. Some mothers worry that if they don't breastfeed, they won't bond with their baby. But the truth is, loving mothers will always create a special bond with their children. And feeding — no matter how — is a great time to strengthen that bond.

Nursing can be a wonderful experience for both mother and baby. It provides ideal nourishment and a special bonding experience that many mothers cherish. Here are some of the many benefits of breastfeeding:

Fighting infections and other conditions. Breastfed babies have fewer infections and hospitalizations than formula-fed infants. During breastfeeding, antibodies and other germ-fighting factors pass from a mother to her baby and strengthen the immune system. This helps lower a baby's chances of getting many infections and may protect babies against allergies, asthma, diabetes, obesity, and sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS).

Nutrition and ease of digestion. Often called the "perfect food" for a human baby's digestive system, breast milk's components — lactose, protein (whey and casein), and fat — are easily digested by a newborn. As a group, breastfed infants have less difficulty with digestion than do formula-fed infants. Breast milk tends to be more easily digested so that breastfed babies have fewer bouts of diarrhea or constipation. Breast milk also naturally contains many of the vitamins and minerals that a newborn requires. One exception is vitamin D — the AAP recommends that all breastfed babies begin receiving vitamin D supplements during the first 2 months and continuing until a baby consumes enough vitamin D-fortified formula or milk (after 1 year of age).

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulates formula companies to ensure they provide all the necessary nutrients (including vitamin D) in their formulas. Still, commercial formulas can't completely match breast milk's exact composition. Why? Because milk is a living substance made by each mother for her individual infant, a process that can't be duplicated in a factory.

Free. Breast milk doesn't cost a cent, while the cost of formula quickly adds up. And unless you're pumping breast milk and giving it to your baby, there's no need for bottles, nipples, and other supplies that can be costly. Since breastfed babies are less likely to be sick, that may mean they make fewer trips to the doctor's office, so fewer co-pays and less money are paid for prescriptions and over-the-counter medicines.

Different tastes. Nursing mothers usually need 500 extra calories per day, which means they should eat a wide variety of well-balanced foods. This introduces breastfed babies to different tastes through their mothers' breast milk, which has different flavors depending on what their mothers have eaten. By tasting the foods of their "culture," breastfed infants more easily accept solid foods.

Convenience. With no last-minute runs to the store for more formula, breast milk is always fresh and available whether you're home or out and about. And when women breastfeed, there's no need to wash bottles and nipples or warm up bottles in the middle of the night.

Smarter babies. Some studies suggest that children who were exclusively breastfed have slightly higher IQs than children who were formula fed.

"Skin-to-skin" contact. Many nursing mothers really enjoy the experience of bonding so closely with their babies. And the skin-to-skin contact can enhance the emotional connection between mother and infant.

Beneficial for mom, too. The ability to totally nourish a baby can help a new mother feel confident in her ability to care for her baby. Breastfeeding also burns calories and helps shrink the uterus, so nursing moms may be able to return to their pre-pregnancy shape and weight quicker. Also, studies show that breastfeeding helps lower the risk of breast cancer, high blood pressure, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease, and also may help decrease the risk of uterine and ovarian cancer.

While weighing the pros and cons (or if challenges occur) talk to a doctor or lactation consultant. These health care providers can give more information about the options available.

Source: KidsHealth from Nemours <http://kidshealth.org/en/parents/breast-bottle-feeding.html#>

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