

Benefits of Breastfeeding

Babies deserve the very best, and according to the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), breast milk is the best first food for them.

Human milk and formula are different. Human milk provides all of the protein, sugar, fat and vitamins your baby needs to be healthy. What's more, it helps to protect your baby against certain diseases and infections. Because of the protective substances in human milk, breastfed children are less likely to have the following:

- Ear infections (otitis media)
- Allergies
- Vomiting
- Diarrhea
- Pneumonia, wheezing and bronchiolitis
- Meningitis

According to the AAP, breastfeeding may also help to protect against Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS).

Many experts recommend breastfeeding for as long as possible, one year or even longer.

The primary benefit of breast milk is nutritional, since it contains just the right amount of fatty acids, lactose, water and amino acids for digestion, brain development and growth. Infant formula from a bottle cannot compete with those benefits.

Human milk straight from a mother's breast is also free of contamination by polluted water or dirty bottles.

Babies are not really allergic to their mother's milk, although they may have a reaction to something the mother eats. By talking with your doctor you can determine which food causes the reaction and eliminate it from your diet.

Breastfeeding is also beneficial for mothers. Not only are there no bottles to sterilize and no formula to buy, it may be easier for you to lose the pounds of pregnancy as since nursing burns extra calories. Lactation also stimulates the uterus to contract back to its original size.

While lactation is usually a natural result of pregnancy, breastfeeding is not always easy. Following are tips from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration on how to make breastfeeding a success:

- Get an early start. Nursing should begin within an hour after delivery (if possible), when an infant is awake and the sucking instinct is strong.
- Proper positioning. The baby's mouth should be wide open, with the nipple as far back into his or her mouth as possible. This minimizes soreness for the mother. A nurse or lactation consultant can help you find a comfortable nursing position.
- Nurse on demand. Newborns need to nurse frequently, at least every two hours and not on any strict schedule. This will stimulate the mother's breasts to produce milk. Since breast milk is more easily digested than formula, breast-fed babies often eat more frequently than bottle-fed babies.
- No supplements. Nursing babies don't need sugar water or formula supplements. These may interfere with their appetite for nursing, which can lead to a diminished milk supply.
- Delay artificial nipples. It's best to wait at least a week or two before introducing a pacifier, so the baby doesn't get confused.
- Air dry. In the early postpartum period or until your nipples toughen, moms should air dry after each nursing to prevent cracking, which can lead to infection. If your nipples crack, you can coat them with breast milk or other natural moisturizers to help them heal.
- Watch for infection. Symptoms of breast infection include fever and painful lumps and redness in the breast. These require immediate medical attention.
- Expect engorgement. A new mother usually produces a substantial milk supply, making your breasts large, hard and painful for a few days. To relieve this engorgement, you should feed the baby frequently and on demand until your body adjusts and produces only what the baby needs. In the meantime, you can take over-the-counter pain relievers, apply warm, wet compresses to your breasts and take warm baths to relieve the pain.
- Eat right and rest. To produce plenty of good milk, the nursing mother needs a balanced diet that includes extra calories and six to eight glasses of fluid everyday. You should also rest as much as possible to prevent breast infections, which are aggravated by fatigue.