

## Advantages of Breastfeeding

I've heard breastfeeding is hard to do. What are the advantages of breastfeeding my infant?

Breastfeeding is the preferred method for feeding babies as it provides optimal nutrition for the infant and has many positive effects for the mother. Advantages are numerous and include improved developmental outcomes, lower risk of infection and chronic disease. In a larger sense, breastfeeding can also improve our national economy and help make a "greener" society for our global community.

In the area of infant development, breastfed babies show significant improvement in measured outcomes as compared to formula fed babies. When tested at 7 and 8 years of age, children who were breastfed for more than 8 months had mean verbal IQ scores nearly 4 points higher than those children who did not receive human milk as infants.

The anti-infective properties of human milk are well known and have not been duplicated in infant formulas. Breastmilk has high concentrations of immunoglobulins and leukocytes (special proteins that are a part of your immune system). These proteins are passed from mother to baby at each feeding and help protect the infant from infection during a vulnerable time of growth. Breastfeeding helps protect against infantile diarrhea, respiratory infections like those caused by respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) and other serious bacterial infections like bacteremia (infection of the blood), meningitis (infection of the lining of the spinal cord) and pneumonia.

Breastfeeding can also lower your infants' risk of developing chronic diseases. These diseases include diabetes, celiac disease, obesity, childhood cancer and sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS). The longer the infant is breastfed, the more protective the effect (especially more than 8 months). Some of the most common problems seen in a pediatrician's office are asthma and allergies. Breastfed infants have a lower incidence of skin problems, asthma and allergies than their formula fed counterparts.

Some of the most important advantages of breastfeeding are those for the breastfeeding mother. Breastfeeding decreases the amount and duration of postpartum bleeding through the release of the hormone oxytocin. Oxytocin stimulates uterine contraction, which helps your uterus return to its normal size after delivery. This may cause cramping during the onset of breastfeeding and lactation, but quickly resolves over the first week postpartum. Women who have breastfed have lower incidences of breast and ovarian cancer as well as a decreased rate of hip fractures and osteoporosis in the postmenopausal period. Breastfeeding requires significant caloric expenditure by the mother, up to 500 calories/day. This can help mothers lose some of the extra weight gained during pregnancy. To put this in perspective, it's like running a 5-mile race every day without leaving the comfort of your chair!

The annual cost to the health care system of women not breastfeeding is several billion dollars. As an example, increased percentages of breastfeeding women decrease costs for public health programs (like WIC) and lost parental days from work (due to a decrease in overall infant illness). The environment also benefits from increased rates of breastfeeding, as breastfeeding produces less waste (no formula cans and bottles, etc.) and saves energy. Artificial feeding products require more energy and resources in production and transportation.

Breastfeeding is important for our babies, our mother sand our global community. Talk to your pediatrician about how to make your breastfeeding efforts a success.

### Bibliography

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