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Breastfeeding Benefits and Resources: Benefits for Babies and Mothers[1]

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You may have heard "breast is best," but do you know why breastmilk is the best diet for babies? Did you know that breastfeeding benefits moms, too? This publication summarizes the known benefits of breastfeeding and is written for people from all educational backgrounds.

Figure 1. Although it may take work, breastfeeding is good for your baby's health and your own!
Credits: National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, National Institutes of Health

An Important Note: Not all mothers are able to breastfeed (Sriraman and Kellams 2016). If you are looking for help, please contact your doctor, an international board-certified lactation consultant in your area (the International Lactation Consultant Association maintains a searchable database of its members at https://ilca.org/why-ibclc-falc/), La Leche League, and/or Breastfeeding USA. The focus of this publication is on the benefits of breastfeeding. If you are unable to breastfeed despite trying your very best, you are not alone. Please know that you are a good mother, but public health and medicine have failed you. More babies are breastfed in countries and states that have better systems to help mothers learn to breastfeed (especially without long wait times), give mothers longer paid maternity leave so that they have time to breastfeed, offer help for mothers who do not produce enough breastmilk, and maintain better donor milk banks with enough milk to supply healthy infants, as well as the most medically vulnerable infants. This publication is intended to clarify why breastfeeding is optimal for infant and mother health. **This information may be difficult to read if you are currently struggling to breastfeed successfully.** If you are aware of the importance of breastfeeding and looking for help, **please consult the resources mentioned at the start of this note and postpone reading any further into this publication**.

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Benefits to Baby

Healthier Babies

There are many benefits of breastmilk for babies. Breastmilk contains antibodies and other compounds that help babies fight off pathogens (Oddy 2001). This means babies who are breastfed are less likely to get sick from bad germs. If a breastfed baby does get sick, the antibodies in breastmilk will change to help the baby recover faster (López-Alarcón et al. 1997). These antibodies help protect against diarrhea (Lamberti et al. 2011), respiratory infections (Gorlanova et al. 2016), and even ear infections (Abrahams and Labbok 2011)!

The benefits of breastfeeding do not end when a baby is weaned. Babies exclusively breastfed for the first six months of life are healthier for years to come. These babies are less likely to develop asthma (Lodge et al. 2015), allergy (Nuzzi et al. 2021), type 1 diabetes (Sadauskaitė-Kuehne et al. 2004), autism (Tseng et al. 2019), and obesity (Shields et al. 2006).

Better Chance of Living to First Birthday

Please, if you are currently struggling to breastfeed, skip the next paragraph. Formula is lifesaving when a mother cannot breastfeed for any reason and donor milk is unavailable. This makes formula a medical intervention—if for some reason you cannot breastfeed or your baby cannot breastfeed, and donor milk is unavailable, then formula feeding is medically necessary. If a mother is unable to breastfeed, formula should be used without worry or guilt. An unfed baby will not survive, so keeping a baby fed must be the top priority.

Babies fed breastmilk are less likely to die (Li et al. 2022; Chen and Rogan 2004). This is true even in the United States and for babies born at term (Li et al. 2022). Fortunately, infant deaths in the United States are very rare, so most formula-fed infants will be fine. For example, breastfeeding is well-known to reduce Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) (Vennemann 2009), which is the sudden death of an infant without a known cause. This does not mean that formula is bad; if breastmilk is unavailable, formula will save a baby's life. However, it does mean that all reasonable efforts should be made to provide breastmilk to a baby, as breastfeeding is potentially lifesaving and will increase the chances a baby will live to see their first birthday.

How Breastmilk Changes in Composition to Meet Nutritional Needs

Breastmilk changes over time. The first milk produced after birth is called colostrum. Colostrum has lots of compounds that help keep babies healthy (Ballard and Morrow 2013), is rich in minerals, and has lower levels of sugar and fat (Institute of Medicine 1991). As babies age and need more energy to grow, the sugar and fat content of breastmilk increases (Institute of Medicine 1991).

Breastmilk will also change depending on what a mother eats (Keikha et al. 2017). This has a surprising benefit: Babies are more likely to enjoy flavors from foods their mothers ate while breastfeeding (Ventura et al. 2021), including vegetables (Burnier et al. 2011). The different flavors present in breastmilk mean breastfed babies are less likely to be picky eaters than formula-fed infants (Shim et al. 2011).

Benefits to Mom

Lower Risk of Disease

Women who breastfeed have lower risks of breast cancer (Zhou et al. 2015) and ovarian cancer (Babic et al. 2020). This is true even when a mother carries the *BRCA1* allele (Kotsopoulos et al. 2012), a gene that greatly increases the risk of breast cancer. A longer duration of breastfeeding is more protective, so exclusive breastfeeding for six months and then continuing to breastfeed for two years or longer—as recommended by the World Health Organization and American Academy of Pediatrics—helps moms, too!

Women who breastfeed their babies also have lower risks of high blood pressure (Park and Choi 2018), stroke (Jacobson et al. 2018), type 2 diabetes (Schwarz et al. 2010), and heart attack (Nguyen et al. 2017).

Better Recovery After Birth

Pregnancy and delivery are tough on the body, but breastfeeding helps with recovery! Breastfeeding helps the uterus shrink and reduces bleeding (Labbok 2001); it also helps the mother lose the excess weight gained during pregnancy (Jarlenski et al. 2014).

Better Mental Health

Breastfeeding reduces the chance of experiencing postpartum depression (Alimi et al. 2021). Another benefit is that breastfeeding may promote bonding with the baby (Linde et al. 2020). As an added bonus, mothers who exclusively breastfeed get an average of 30 minutes more sleep each

night than those who feed their babies formula (Doan et al. 2014)!

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