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## **Amazing Benefits of Breastfeeding**

**By Lisa Fiore**

### **Why Breastfeed?**

Getting ready for the birth of your baby is an exciting time. One of the most important decisions parents will make is how to feed their baby. In a modern world, what comes naturally, such as breastfeeding, is often overlooked. And in the U.S. we are inundated with advertisements, marketing campaigns and supermarket shelves that push manmade, synthetic formulas over mother's milk, the ultimate food for your baby. Further, the federally funded WIC program available for families in need, doesn't teach breastfeeding (which is cheaper and healthier), but instead pushes formulas full of genetically modified substances and synthetic, processed dyes, sugars and foods that disrupt the babies gastrointestinal systems.

Before making the leap to formulas, most of which are laden with genetically modified soy and other synthetic, health-damaging chemicals, educate yourself on this very important issue.

Deciding to breastfeed can give your baby the best possible start in life. Breastfeeding benefits you and your baby in many ways, beyond the physical contact and warmth that helps create a special bond between mother and baby. Breast milk also provides babies with amazing nutrition, is easier to digest and assimilate, has the necessary growth factors for healthy organ development and contains antibodies that help create a stronger, healthier immune system.

In the event breastfeeding is truly not possible explore homemade formula options that do not contain toxic chemicals, processed and/or synthetic foods or genetically modified organisms (GMOs). My favorite is Dr. Antonacci's recipe for a homemade formula.

### **Immune System Benefits - Especially from Multiple Mothers**

In general, the longer women breastfeed, the greater the benefits will be to her and the baby, and the longer these benefits will last. My mother breastfed my brother and me for six months each and this was in the late 50's and early 60's, a time when breastfeeding was discouraged. I feel blessed she had the courage to say "NO" to formula, despite the insistence by her doctors that she was making a poor choice.



I personally breastfed both of my children for over 2 years each and know others that have gone longer. For my children, I solely fed them breast milk for the first 6 months of their lives and over the subsequent months I slowly added mashed vegetables and fruits while I continued to breastfeed. When I had to return to work, I pumped milk so that my children could still enjoy my breast milk during the time I was not home. They did not have one drop of formula. If I can do it, you can too!

If you aren't sure yet, consider this fact. Have you ever noticed that babies fed formula and processed-foods "spit up" more often and the "spit up" stains their clothing? Their poop is more likely to stain their clothes too. If you haven't paid attention, next time you are with a formula fed infant take note. The reverse is true for infants fed breast milk and real food from organic and freshly mashed vegetables and fruits. "Spit up" from Breast milk and fresh, organic food do not stain or are less likely to stain because they do not contain harsh chemicals or synthetic dyes and foods that are detrimental to the babies' health. Further, the baby will "spit up" less often because it is real food the babies' body can use, not toxic chemicals the babies' body is trying to purge.

Breast milk is best for your baby, and the benefits of breastfeeding extend well beyond basic nutrition. In addition to containing all the vitamins and nutrients babies need in the first six months of life, breast milk is packed with disease-fighting substances that protect babies from infection and illness. And scientific studies have shown that breastfeeding is good for the *mother's* health, too (more on this later)!

For many mothers and babies, breastfeeding goes smoothly from the start. For others, it takes a little time and several attempts. Like anything new, breastfeeding takes some practice. This is perfectly normal. If you need help, consult a healthcare professional of your choice, lactation specialist or breastfeeding support group. It will be well worth the extra effort.

Numerous studies from around the world have shown that stomach viruses, lower respiratory illnesses, ear infections, meningitis and other illnesses occur less often in breastfed babies and are less severe when they do happen. The cells, hormones, and antibodies in breast milk protect babies from these illnesses and more. This protection is unique and changes to meet your baby's needs.

Exclusive breastfeeding (meaning no solid food, formula, or water) for at least six months seems to offer the most protection and when possible it is recommended to go several years or longer. In tribal communities, not exposed to the industrialized world, it is not uncommon to breastfeed for 5+ years.

In the animal world, nursing the young is the only way for survival and in many animal communities the females nurse each other's young. Remember, each mother has her own unique set of antibodies that offer protection and enhance the newborn's immune system.



In the wild, animals instinctively know this is true and by nursing one another's young they are increasing their offspring's chances of survival.

To take advantage of this fact females in a particular animal community (such as lions) will get pregnant and have their young at the same time. Once the young are born they receive milk from each of the mothers, thus optimizing their immune systems and the bodies ability to deal with disease and illness. In early times, humans were more likely to have their infants nurse from multiple mothers. In today's world, people often have a reaction that it "isn't normal" or "isn't healthy" or don't even know about the possibility at all.

Dr. Antonacci's former practice partner, familiar with the advantages of an infant nursing from multiple mothers, fed her sister's children and vice versa, thus increasing the overall immune systems and health of the children in their families. Of course, they properly fed and prepared their bodies prior to pregnancy, thus increasing the overall benefit when it was time to nurse.

## **Breastfeeding: A Natural Gift Full of Nutrients & Antibodies**

Breast milk helps babies grow healthy and strong from that very first drop of milk the baby gets when he or she finally learns how to latch on to mom's breast.

The first milk is actually colostrum and is considered the "gold" of milk. It is the thick, first milk that women make during pregnancy and just after birth. It typically is a deep yellow color. This milk is full of nutrients and antibodies to protect babies from infections.

Further, colostrum helps with the development and proper functioning of the newborn's digestive system. The infant receives a small amount at each feeding because the stomach of a newborn is tiny and can only hold a small amount. But this small amount, received at each feeding, is extremely important for the babies' health.

Colostrum typically lasts for three to five days, and thereafter changes to mature milk. The mature milk women produce contains the right amount of fat, sugar, protein and water to feed babies at a cellular level and to help babies grow and maintain health. Further, it has loads of beneficial bacteria or probiotic. It is thinner than colostrum, but it still contains the nutrients and antibodies babies need for healthy development.

## **What Other Benefits Does Breastfeeding Offer My Baby?**

One large study by the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences showed that children who are breastfed have a 20 percent lower risk of dying between the ages of 28 days and 1 year than children who weren't breastfed. Longer breastfeeding is associated with lower risk of death and disease.



A substance called secretory immunoglobulin A (IgA) is present in large amounts in colostrum, the first milk your body produces for your baby. (Secretory IgA is present in lower concentrations in mature breast milk.) This substance fortifies the babies' immune system by guarding against invading germs and by forming a protective layer on the mucous membranes in your baby's intestines, nose, and throat.

Breast milk is specifically tailored to each baby. The mother's body responds to pathogens (virus and bacteria) that are in her body and makes secretory IgA that's specific to those pathogens, creating protection for her baby based on whatever she has been exposed to in the past or present.

Breastfeeding's protection against illness lasts beyond the baby's breastfeeding stage, too. Studies have shown that breastfeeding can reduce a child's risk of developing certain childhood cancers. Scientists don't know exactly how breast milk reduces the risk, but they think antibodies in breast milk may give a baby's immune system a boost.

Breastfeeding may also help children avoid a host of diseases that strike later in life, such as type 1 and type II diabetes, heart disease, inflammatory bowel disease and more. In fact, premies given breast milk as babies are less likely to have high blood pressure by the time they're teenagers.

Research suggests that breastfed babies have lower risks of:

- Allergies
- Asthma
- Bronchiolitis
- Cancer
- Childhood leukemia
- Childhood obesity
- Crohn's Disease/Ulcerative Colitis
- Diabetes Type I and II
- Diarrhea and vomiting
- Ear infections
- Eczema (atopic dermatitis)
- General Health Problems
- Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBS)
- Lower respiratory infections
- Meningitis
- Necrotizing enterocolitis, a disease that affects the gastrointestinal tract in pre-term infants
- Obesity
- Pneumonia
- Sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS)
- Wheezing



For babies who aren't breastfed, researchers have documented a link between lack of breastfeeding and later development of Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis.

## **Breastfeeding Protects Your Baby from Developing Allergies**

According to one study, babies who are fed formula based on cow's milk or soy tend to have more allergic reactions than breastfed babies. Although the study did not make the distinction, the cow's milk used in the study was pasteurized cow's milk (not raw, unpasteurized cow or goat milk). This is an important distinction to make as the heat used in pasteurization kills the nutrients and enzymes needed for health and creates inflammation and havoc in the body to include later issues with allergies. Raw, whole fat milk from cow, goat or sheep does not have this problem just as mother's milk (which is "raw" and not pasteurized) does not have this problem.

Scientists think that immune factors such as secretory IgA (only available in breast milk) help prevent allergic reactions to food by providing a layer of protection to a baby's intestinal tract. Without this protection, inflammation can develop and the wall of the intestine can become "leaky." This allows undigested proteins to cross the gut where they can cause an allergic reaction and other health problems.

Babies who are fed formula rather than breast milk don't get this layer of protection, so they're more vulnerable to inflammation, allergies, and other eventual health issues.

## **Breastfeeding Linked to Higher Intelligence**

A long-term study pointed to a link between breastfeeding and intelligence in children. The research, based in Brazil, traced nearly 3,500 babies from all walks of life, and found those who had been breastfed for longer went on to score higher on IQ tests as adults.

Dr. Bernardo Lessa Horta, from the Federal University of Pelotas in Brazil, said his study offers a unique insight because in the population he studied, breastfeeding was evenly distributed across social class and was not something just used by the rich and educated. Most of the babies, irrespective of social class, were breastfed and some for less than a month and others for more than a year.

Those who were breastfed for longer scored higher on measures of intelligence as adults. They were also more likely to earn a higher wage and to have completed more schooling. Longer term, Dr. Horta believes breast milk may offer an advantage because it is a good source of long-chain saturated fatty acids that are essential for brain development.

Numerous other studies have found a connection between breastfeeding and cognitive development. In a study of more than 17,000 infants followed from birth to 6 1/2 years, researchers concluded from IQ scores and other intelligence tests that prolonged and exclusive breastfeeding significantly improves cognitive development and functioning.



Another study of almost 4,000 children showed that babies who were breastfed had significantly higher scores on a vocabulary test at 5 years of age than children who were not breastfed. And the scores were higher the longer they had been nursed.

Preterm infants with extremely low birth weight who received breast milk shortly after birth improved their mental development scores at 18 months when compared with preterm infants who weren't given breast milk.

Experts say that the emotional bonding that takes place during breastfeeding probably contributes to some of the brainpower benefits, but that the fatty acids in breast milk plays the biggest role.

## **Breastfeeding Linked to Less Childhood Obesity**

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends breastfeeding as a way to help reduce your child's risk of becoming overweight or obese. An analysis of 17 studies published in the *American Journal of Epidemiology* shows that breastfeeding reduces a child's risk of becoming overweight as a teen or adult. The strongest effect is in children who were exclusively breastfed. Further, the odds of being overweight decreased the longer the infant was breastfed.

Experts site several reasons why breastfeeding can reduce the risk of pediatric overweight children:

- Breastfed babies are better at eating until their hunger is satisfied (versus overeating). This leads to healthier eating patterns as they grow. Breastfed babies respond to internal cues for when they are hungry and when they are full, versus a bottle-fed infant that may be encouraged to finish a bottle even when not hungry.
- Breast milk has a more positive effect on the infant's metabolism and hormones. Breast milk has lower levels of insulin, which stimulates the creation and storage of fat. Formula, which has higher concentrations of insulin can result in excessive weight gain and obesity. The higher protein content of formula may also result in an increase in insulin.
- Breastfed milk contains more leptin. Leptin is a hormone that plays a role in regulating appetite and fat.
- Breastfed babies are exposed to flavors through the mother's milk, and therefore are more likely to try and accept new and healthy foods to include fruits and vegetables. These foods play a vital role in maintaining a healthy body weight over a lifetime. Further, since breast milk contains flavors for foods the mother eats, a mother who eats a wide variety of foods can influence her child's tastes for life and help encourage more healthy eating patterns. The taste of formula never varies which means a formula fed baby does not get exposed to a variety of tastes and is less likely to try and accept a wide variety of foods.

## **Breastfeeding Lowers Your Baby's Risk of SIDS**

- According to a new two-part series of a study published by the weekly medical journal, The Lancet, breastfeeding has substantial benefits for all mothers and newborns. It reduces the risk of sudden infant deaths and intestinal diseases, as well as protects women from certain types of cancer, including breast and ovarian cancer, the study claims.
- Further, optimal breastfeeding practices, which includes breastfeeding infants and young children continuously right from the birth up to six months, could save about 820,000 children's lives and reduce nearly 20,000 breast cancer deaths a year.
- Additionally, a large German study published in 2009 found that breastfeeding – either exclusively or partially – is associated with a lower risk of sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS). The researchers concluded that exclusive breastfeeding at 1 month of age cut the risk of SIDS in half.
- The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends breastfeeding for as long as possible to reduce the risk of SIDS.
- Although this article does not cover vaccinations, research suggests a reduction in the vaccine schedule or no vaccines lowers the risk of SIDS also (go to [www.NVIC.org](http://www.NVIC.org) for more information).

## **Is Breastfeeding Good for Moms Too?**

Breastfeeding is good for the mother's health because it:

- Creates physical and emotional bonding with the baby
- Releases hormones in the mother's body that promotes mothering behavior and lowers risk of postpartum depression.
- Returns the uterus to the size it was before pregnancy more quickly.
- Releases Oxytocin while mothers nurse, which helps the uterus contract after birth and results in less postpartum bleeding.
- Burns more calories and may help women lose the extra weight gained during pregnancy.
- Delays the return of menstrual periods to help keep iron in body.
- Reduces the risk of ovarian cancer and breast cancer.
- Keeps bones strong, which helps protect against bone fractures in older age.

## **Breastfeeding can Reduce Stress Level and Risk of Postpartum Depression**

- The National Institutes of Health reviewed more than 9,000 study abstracts and concluded that women who didn't breastfeed or who stopped breastfeeding early on had a higher risk of postpartum depression.



- Many women report feeling relaxed while breastfeeding. That's because nursing triggers the release of the hormone oxytocin. Numerous studies in animals and humans have found that oxytocin promotes nurturing and relaxation. This lowers stress, which decreases the likelihood of getting depressed.
- One study found that women who had high amounts of oxytocin in their system (50 percent of breastfeeding moms as opposed to 8 percent of bottle-feeding moms) had lower blood pressure after being asked to talk about a stressful personal problem.

## **Breastfeeding Reduces the Risk of Breast and Ovarian Cancer**

- Numerous studies have found that the longer women breastfeed, the more they're protected against breast and ovarian cancer. For breast cancer, nursing for at least a year appears to have the most protective effect.
- It's not entirely clear how breastfeeding helps, but it may have to do with the structural changes in breast tissue caused by breastfeeding and the fact that lactation suppresses the amount of estrogen your body produces. Researchers think the effect on ovarian cancer may be related to estrogen suppression as well.

With all of the benefits associated with breastfeeding for both mothers and babies, please make this an important consideration when family planning. Give your child the best start possible. You won't regret your decision.