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Breastfeeding: Does it Really Matter?

Numerous medical and public health organizations have position statements and websites devoted to breastfeeding, including extensive research on the health benefits of breastfeeding, data on breastfeeding rates, how-to breastfeed guides, and action plans to help communities create a supportive environment for breastfeeding mothers and babies (1).

Breastfeeding Rates in 2016

Medical and public health experts recommend that babies be exclusively breastfed for 6 months, with breastfeeding to continue for 12 months (2).

Breastfeeding rates in the United States were lowest in the 1960's. Over the past 20 years, extensive research and community support have resulted in a steady increase in the number of mothers who breastfeed. In 2016, nationwide, 81% of mothers initiated breastfeeding, 44.4% of infants were exclusively breastfed for 3 months and 22.3% were exclusively breastfed for 6 months.

Infant Health Benefits

The most comprehensive breastfeeding research concludes that breastfeeding is associated with a decreased risk of ear infections, diarrhea, pneumonias and other severe lower respiratory tract infections, atopic dermatitis, asthma in young children, childhood obesity, type I and type II diabetes, childhood leukemia, sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) and necrotizing enterocolitis. Breastfed children score higher on cognitive testing throughout childhood (4).

Maternal Health Benefits

For mothers, breastfeeding is associated with a decreased risk of type 2 diabetes, breast, endometrial, and ovarian cancer, as well as a decreased risk of postpartum depression.

Human Milk

Human milk is rich in nutrients and antibodies that protect an infant. It is designed with the right amount of fat, sugar, water and proteins to help a human infant develop optimally. Babies digest human milk easily; its composition changes throughout the day, and, as a baby matures, to match the unique needs of a human infant (5). Human milk has not been duplicated in the laboratory setting and new components in human milk and their role in growth and development are constantly emerging.

Benefits to Society

- Mothers miss less work when their babies are breastfed. The Affordable Care Act amended the U.S. Fair Labor Standards Act in 2010 to require employers to provide private space and reasonable breaks for breastfeeding mothers of infants under one year of age (2).

- If 90% of US mothers would exclusively breastfeed for the recommended six months, nearly 1,000 infant deaths could be prevented and the US would save \$13 billion a year in health care costs. Breastfed infants require fewer sick care visits, prescriptions and hospitalization (2).
- Formula feeding results in a large environmental footprint due to transportation and production costs involved with converting cow's milk to a digestible formula for human infants (2).
- Breastfeeding is "free". When low income women breastfeed, they are more self-sufficient and require fewer food program subsidies. Formula is a \$4 billion industry; 50% of formula is purchased by the federal government with taxpayer dollars and distributed via the Women Infant and Children (WIC) food supplement program. If a mother does not qualify for WIC, a family will need to purchase ~\$1,500-\$3,000 worth of formula annually to feed their baby.
- The breastfeeding process is designed to calm and quiet a baby. Many social scientists feel that the intimacy of breastfeeding is linked to increased brain development and enhanced social skills that are vital in today's rapidly changing world.

References:

1. Including, but not limited to, the U.S. Surgeon General, the US Department of Health and Human Services Office on Women's Health, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), the American Academy of Family Physicians, the American Public Health Association (APA), the American College of Nurse Midwives (ACNM), and the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG).
2. www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/calls/breastfeeding/index.html The US Surgeon General released a Call to Action to Support Breastfeeding in January 2011. This web site contains the Executive Summary, as well as a How to Breastfeed guide and an Action Plan outlining how communities can support breastfeeding mothers.
3. www.cdc.gov/breastfeeding This site has the 2016 CDC report card on breastfeeding rates, the 2013 Guide to Strategies to Support Breastfeeding Mothers and Babies, and a report on Breastfeeding Progress in the US.
4. <http://www.thelancet.com/series/breastfeeding>. The Lancet, a peer-reviewed medical journal, summarized the most recent research on the risks of not breastfeeding in its January 2016 edition.
5. www.womenshealth.gov/breastfeeding/why-breastfeeding-is-important The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office on Women's Health web site contains comprehensive Information on the impact of breastfeeding, as well as research articles, information for health care providers, and a long list of publications and websites related to breastfeeding.