

Breastfeeding - The Benefits

Breastfeeding is the best form of nutrition for babies. Breastmilk provides all the nutrients a baby needs. In the UK it is recommended that babies are fed by breastfeeding alone for their first six months. (Rarely, uncommon medical conditions of babies or mothers mean that breastfeeding is not advisable.) The recommended age for starting to add in solid foods ('weaning') is six months. Below are eight good reasons why 'breast is best' for most babies and mothers.

What are the benefits of breastfeeding?

It helps to prevent infection

On average, breast fed babies have fewer infections in their early life. In particular they have less: diarrhoea and vomiting, chest infections, and ear infections compared to babies who are not breast fed. The main reason for this is that antibodies and other proteins are passed in the breast milk from mother to baby. These help to protect against infection.

Long-term health of your baby

There is some evidence that children who are breast fed are less likely to be obese when they are grown up. There is also growing evidence that babies who are breast fed are less likely to develop diabetes and heart disease in later life.

It may help to prevent cot death

There is some evidence that sudden infant death syndrome (cot death) is less common in breast fed babies. This is not fully explained, although the fact that breast fed babies have fewer infections is possibly a contributing factor.

Mother's health may benefit

You are less likely to develop cancer of the breast if you breast feed your children. Another benefit for some mothers is that it is easier to lose weight after giving birth if you are breastfeeding.

Emotional factors

It is difficult to assess this, and no firm conclusions can be drawn. However, it is thought that breastfeeding enhances the 'bonding' process between baby and mother.

No mistakes

Breast milk is the ideal baby food. It has the perfect combination of proteins, fats, carbohydrate, and fluids that new-born babies require.

Convenience

Breastfeeding is the most convenient method of feeding. There is no preparation time, and it is always available.

Financial

Breastfeeding is cheap (actually, it is free!).

Some worries about breastfeeding

If you have any worries or concerns about breastfeeding, then do talk to your health visitor or midwife. Most worries are unfounded, and difficulties can usually be overcome. Because it is important that you think seriously about breastfeeding, health visitors or midwives are only too pleased to discuss this issue.

Four common concerns are as follows:

"I have to go back to work in a few weeks, is it worthwhile just for a short period of time?"

YES, even if you only breast feed for a short period of time there are benefits. In particular, the advantage of preventing infection has a knock-on effect, and you will have given the baby valuable antibodies. But, if possible, try to continue breastfeeding for six months.

"Doesn't it tie me too much to the baby?"

Breastfeeding does require commitment and time. But, most mothers are happy to give this time for the benefits to the baby. One way of freeing up some time is to express some breast milk into containers. You can keep breast milk in a fridge for a short time. For example, you can use this if you have an evening out and you are happy for your baby to be fed breast milk from a bottle during the time you are away.

"The baby's father won't be able to feed."

There are many ways for fathers to be involved with their baby - holding, bathing, playing, and helping with caring for the baby in many other ways.

"It's too embarrassing and inconvenient whilst out."

Have you noticed that more shops and public places now provide mother and baby rooms to cater for breastfeeding mothers. Breastfeeding has become a much more accepted part of society.

Further information

Contact your health visitor, midwife, or local breastfeeding support group if you have any problems. Another source of support and information is:

La Leche League

PO Box 29, West Bridgford, Nottingham, NG2 7NP

Helpline (24hrs) 0845 120 2918 Web: www.laleche.org.uk

Aims to help mothers to breast feed through mother-to-mother support, encouragement, information and education, and to promote a better understanding of breastfeeding as an important element in the healthy development of the baby and the mother.

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Comprehensive patient resources are available at www.patient.co.uk