

BREAST-FEEDING



Experts all agree that breast milk is the best nutrition for babies. It contains all the essential nutrients that your baby needs in the first six months. Breast-feeding can provide many health benefits for both baby and mother.

Breast-feeding can, however, take a lot of practice and perseverance. As with any new task, it is something to be learnt. Do not be scared to ask questions about breast-feeding or if you are finding breast-feeding difficult.

Even if you don't exclusively breast-feed, any amount of breast milk your baby gets is still beneficial for as long as they get it.

What are the benefits of breast-feeding for the baby?

Complete nutrition.

Formula milk can never quite match the perfect recipe of breast milk. It contains all the nutrients your baby needs for the first six months. No other fluids (eg. water) are needed for a breast-fed baby. The breast milk composition changes accordingly to provide everything your baby needs. Your baby gets perfectly tailored food for all seasons eg. your breast milk is more watery in the summer and gets thicker and higher in fat during the colder months. Even if your baby is premature, breast milk is still best for your baby and you will be asked to express milk to feed your baby.

Reduces the risk of developing infection

Breast-fed babies have fewer infections in early life. This is because antibodies are passed in breast milk from mother to baby.

The very first milk produced is called colostrum. It is a yellow, sticky substance which is very rich in antibodies (proteins which helps to boost the baby's immature immune system) and high in proteins, vitamins and minerals in a very concentrated form. A newborn baby has a tiny stomach that can hold about a teaspoon of milk. So, even though the amount of colostrum produced is very small, it is sufficient for the baby in the early days until the milk supply comes in.

Even just one feed of colostrum is extremely valuable for both baby and mother's health. The antibodies help the baby to fight against infections eg. gastrointestinal and respiratory infections. Breast-fed babies are less prone to allergies, colic, constipation and ear infections.

Reduces the risk of cot death

Breast-feeding reduces the risk of sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS). The reason for this is unknown but one contributing factor is that breast-fed babies do have less infections and illnesses.

Developmental factors and bonding

Some studies have shown that breast-fed babies may have higher IQ intelligence than formula-fed babies.

Breast-feeding also enhances the bonding process between baby and mother. As such, early skin contact is promoted as soon as possible after delivery. Your baby will feel comfort and security as he feeds from your breast. It also releases the feel good hormone, oxytocin. This helps calm the baby and feel safe.

Less constipation

Breast-fed babies are less likely to be constipated than their formula-fed counterparts.

Advantage in long-term health

Research studies have shown that breast-fed babies will, on average, encounter less health problems in later life compared with those that have not been breast-fed. These health problems include obesity and overweight, high blood pressure, high cholesterol level, eczema, asthma and type 2 diabetes. Exclusive breast-feeding in the first six months provides maximum benefit. But there is still a reduction seen in babies who have been partially breast-fed.

What are the benefits of breast-feeding for the mother?

Convenience.

Breast-feeding is the most convenient method of feeding. There is no preparation time and it is always available. There is no need for bottles, sterilisation or temperature check. This is a real plus point when you are tired and are awoken in the middle of the night to feed your baby.

Cleanliness

Breast milk is free of germs. Washing your nipples with water daily is sufficient enough.

Cost saving

Bottles, sterilisation kits, formula milk, and other bottle-feeding products are costly. Breast-feeding is free.

Contraction of the uterus (womb)

Breast-feeding reduces the chance of bleeding from the uterus by helping the uterus to contract and return back to the pre-pregnancy size faster.

Weight loss

Breast-feeding burns off extra calories and this can lead to faster weight loss after delivery.

Reduces the risk of cancer

There is good evidence to show that breast-feeding reduces your risk of both breast cancer and ovarian cancer.

Reduces the risk of type 2 diabetes and others

Type 2 diabetes, hypertension (high blood pressure) and postnatal depression are less common in women who have breast-fed one or more babies.

Others

Breast-feeding delays the return of menstruation and can help plan your family if you are fully breast feeding (although do not rely on this as a 100% reliable form of contraception!)

Also breast-feeding forces you to look after yourselves and make healthier food choice options as this will provide you with proper nutrients and adequate energy and hydration which is important for breast milk production for your baby.

Disadvantages of breast-feeding

Requires commitment and perseverance

Breast-feeding is time consuming and requires a lot of commitment. A new-born baby will feed every 2-3 hours, day and night (ie. feeding on demand). It will feel like being on call 24-7 and it can be exhausting work. Keep reminding yourself of all the good reasons why you chose to breast-feed. Take short breaks for yourself at intervals and drink plenty of fluids.

Sore nipples

Sore nipples are caused by excess suction by your baby or if he has not latched on well. Sometimes, a thrush infection of the nipples can occur resulting in painful, sore, red and cracked nipples. Your doctor may need to prescribe treatment for both you and your baby for this.

Breast pain and discomfort

Blocked milk ducts – this can cause a painful swollen area in the breast. Allow the baby to feed more often on the affected breast as well as gently massaging the area whilst breast-feeding. Usually a blocked duct will clear in 1-2 days. However, in some cases, the milk duct can become infected and develop into mastitis.

Breast infections

Mastitis occurs when bacteria gets through a crack or sore in the nipple and result in infection in a segment of the breast. Please see your own doctor for further advice and antibiotic treatment for this.

Breast abscess – can occur inside an infected segment of the breast resulting in a collection of pus. There will be a hard, painful, warm lump in your breast with other symptoms of fever and feeling unwell. Please seek advice from your own doctor as this will need urgent medical treatment and the abscess may need to be drained.

Difficulties measuring amount of breast milk taken by baby

There is no way to really measure how much your baby has taken but usually, your baby will latch off when he is fully fed and satisfied from the feed. Remember that during the first part of the feed, your baby will receive more watery foremilk when he starts to breast-feed. As he continues to breast-feed, he receives the hind-milk which is richer in fats and is more satisfying. This contains more nutrition and energy. It is important for your baby to finish on one breast completely before offering the second.

Forgo caffeine and alcoholic drinks

You need to watch your medication use, reduce or stop consuming caffeine and alcoholic drink as a small amount will be passed into the breast milk.

Breast milk jaundice

Breast milk jaundice results in yellowing of the whites of the eyes and skin and is common on breast-fed babies. Depending on the cause of the jaundice – treatment, including phototherapy, may be required.

For breast milk jaundice, no treatment is usually required but it can be worsened if a baby is dehydrated so make sure that your baby is feeding well and hydrated.

Breast milk has many health benefits over formula milk. However, this method may not work for everyone. Some mums are unable to breast-feed for medical reasons, others may have demanding schedules that do not allow for the flexibility needed to breast-feed.

Even if you don't exclusively breast-feed, any amount of breast milk your baby gets (for as long as they get it) is beneficial. It is a good idea to think about your personal preferences before you give birth. If you plan to breast feed, ensure your midwife and doctor are aware, involve your partner and establish all the support you need to reduce any stress and anxiety around feeding your baby.

Remember that this is your decision and you should do the best for yourself and your family.

If you have any queries or concerns, please consult your doctor for further advice.