
The Benefits of Breastmilk

Breastmilk is the best food for your baby. It has just the right amount of nutrients. It protects your baby's digestive system. It protects other body systems in your baby, and it helps your baby grow and develop.



Healthiest for baby

Breastmilk is the ideal food for babies. It has all the nutrients your baby needs to grow healthy and strong.

Breastmilk has these benefits:

- It lowers the risk for sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS).
- It gives babies a lower risk for ear infections in their first year. This is compared to babies who are fed formula.
- It has DHA. This is a type of fat. It helps your baby's growing brain, nervous system, and eyes.
- It is full of antibodies. These help your baby fight infection.
- It lowers your baby's risk for lung illness.
- It lowers the risk of diarrhea.
- It lowers your baby's risk for allergies. Babies fed formula are more likely to have an allergy to cow's milk.

- It lowers your baby's risk for colds and many other diseases.
- It changes as your baby grows. This meets your baby's changing needs.

And it's important to know that:

- Giving only breastmilk for the first 6 months gives your baby more of these benefits.
- Giving breastmilk plus solid food from 6 months to 1 year or more gives more benefits.
- Breastfed babies have fewer long-term health problems when they grow up. These problems include diabetes and obesity.
- Breastfeeding gives contact that your baby loves. Spending time skin-to-skin with you is calming and comforting.

Healthiest for mom

For many people, breastfeeding is a good experience. It creates a strong bond between mother and baby. People who breastfeed also get health benefits. Some benefits for you include:

- You can know that your baby is growing healthy and strong because of your milk.
- Breastmilk is convenient. It's free and clean. It's always at the right temperature.
- Breastfeeding burns calories. This can help you lose pregnancy weight faster.
- Breastfeeding releases hormones that contract the uterus. This helps the uterus return to its normal size after childbirth.
- Mothers who breastfeed have a lower risk for ovarian and breast cancers.
- Some studies have found that breastfeeding may reduce a person's risk for type 2 diabetes and rheumatoid arthritis. It may reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease. This includes high blood pressure and high cholesterol.
- Breastfeeding every day delays the return of your menstrual period. This can help extend the time between pregnancies.

Many people can help you learn to breastfeed. A lactation consultant can help. This is a healthcare provider who is trained to help you breastfeed. Your nurse, midwife, nurse practitioner, obstetrician, pediatrician, or family practice healthcare provider can also help you learn about breastfeeding.

What does it mean to give only breastmilk?

Giving only breastmilk for at least the first 6 months of life is best for your baby. If you need to be away from your baby, you can express breastmilk. This means pumping milk from your breast into a container. Talk with your healthcare provider about the best ways to feed this milk to your baby.

You should not give your baby water, sugar water, formula, or solids during their first 6 months unless your baby's healthcare provider tells you to.

Your baby's provider may tell you to give your baby vitamins, minerals, or medicines. Breastfed babies should be given vitamin D supplements. The provider will tell you the type and amount of vitamin D to give your baby.

What are the risks of not giving only breastmilk?

You now know the many of the benefits of breastfeeding. But you might not know why it's important to give only breastmilk for at least 6 months.

Your baby gets the best protection against health problems when they get only breastmilk. Breastfeeding some of the time is good. But breastfeeding all of the time is best.

Giving your baby formula or other liquids may cause you to:

- Have more problems breastfeeding
- Make less milk
- Be less confident in breastfeeding
- Breastfeed less often
- Stop breastfeeding before your baby is at least 12 months old

When other choices may be needed

Giving only breastmilk is almost always the best thing to do. But your healthcare provider may have reasons to advise giving your baby formula or other liquids. They include:

- **Your baby has a health problem.** There are cases where you may need to add formula or other liquids. This is often only for a short time. This may be the case if your baby has low blood sugar (hypoglycemia), loses body fluids (dehydration), or has high levels of bilirubin.
- **You have certain health problems.** Some infections can be passed from your skin to your baby's skin. Or it can pass through your breastmilk. People with HIV/AIDS or untreated and contagious TB (tuberculosis) should not breastfeed. Women with active skin sores from chickenpox (varicella) can pump their breastmilk and feed their baby. But they should keep their baby's skin from touching any of the sores.
- **You use illegal drugs or drink alcohol.** People who use illegal drugs should not breastfeed. If you are going to have a drink that has alcohol, it's best to do so just after you nurse or pump milk. Breastfeeding or pumping breast milk is OK at least 4 hours after your last drink. That way, your body will have some time to get rid of the alcohol before the next feeding and less of it will reach your baby. Long-term exposure to alcohol in breastmilk may affect your baby's health. It may also cause you to make less milk.
- **You take certain medicines.** If you take any medicines, ask your baby's healthcare provider if you can breastfeed.