
Breastfeeding benefits for mom

REVIEWED BY KRISTIE RIVERS, MD, FAAP, BOARD CERTIFIED PEDIATRICIAN

The benefits of breastfeeding are firmly established for babies, but did you know breastfeeding has long-term benefits for Mom, too?

In those first few days of breastfeeding, your early attempts to breastfeed stimulate the release of oxytocin, a hormone in the pituitary gland that signals the breasts to release or “let down” milk. Oxytocin also causes the uterus to contract and return to its pre-pregnancy state in order to prevent postpartum hemorrhage. Breastfeeding also stimulates the release of prolactin, a hormone that has been found to create a calming effect on the mother, allowing her to relax and develop a special bond with her baby during this close, nurturing time.

Breastfeeding—without substituting formula, foods, or pacifiers for feedings at the breast—is also a natural contraceptive. Bottle-feeding mothers typically begin to menstruate again within 6-8 weeks after birth, but a breastfeeding mom can go several months without menstruating, thus reducing the chances of an unexpected pregnancy. It’s important, however, not to rely on breastfeeding as the only method of contraception. Every woman is different, and if you don’t wish to become pregnant again, you should use another form of birth control. This provides the added benefit of conserving the mother’s iron as well.

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Breastfeeding is also a great way to lose some of that extra “baby weight.” Producing breast milk requires between 200 and 500 calories per day, or the equivalent of about 30 laps in a pool or bicycling uphill for an hour. Studies have also shown that breastfeeding helps reduce blood glucose levels, which has many health benefits, including lowering the risk of type II diabetes. Breastfeeding also lowers the mother’s risk of heart disease, high blood pressure and stroke—and research suggests these benefits last for decades.

In terms of disease prevention, breastfeeding reduces the risk of osteoporosis, despite the fact that Mom’s calcium levels actually drop while breastfeeding. Studies have shown that, when a mother stops breastfeeding, many women’s calcium levels return to their pre-pregnancy state and bone density increases.

Some research has shown that breastfeeding can reduce the risk of hormone-related cancers, including ovarian and uterine cancer. Although it’s not completely understood why, some researchers believe it’s due to the decreased number of menstrual periods, which naturally lowers your levels of hormones that are linked to reproductive cancers, especially estrogen.

For more on breastfeeding, see:

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- Involving dad with breastfeeding
 - Common breastfeeding problems
 - Breastfeeding and marijuana
 - Can I breastfeed when I'm sick?

Reviewed by Dr. Sara Connolly, December 2018

Takeaways

- Breastfeeding burns anywhere between 200-500 calories per day.
- Breastfeeding can be a natural contraceptive; some women who breastfeed can go several months without menstruating.
- Breastfeeding reduces risk factors for three of the most serious diseases for women: female cancers, heart disease, and osteoporosis.
- Breastfeeding provides Mom with regular time to relax quietly with her newborn and create a close emotional bond.