

The Importance of Exclusive Breastfeeding for the First 6 Months

Breastfeeding is a gift only you can give. The benefits last a lifetime.



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The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends that babies should exclusively breastfeed for 6 months. This means feeding babies only mothers' milk until they are 6 months old. Babies need no water or juice or any solid foods during these early months. Breastmilk has all the fluid needed to satisfy thirst and all the nutrients for babies to grow and develop. And it also provides many protective substances, such as antibodies, to shield the baby from illness now and well into the future.

Exclusive breastfeeding protects the baby from disease and illness.

When a baby drinks water or juice, these displace the breastmilk that the baby would have drunk, reducing her ingestion of the precious nutrients and antibodies found in breastmilk.

It takes about 6 months for a baby's gut to mature. Until then, it needs the help of breastmilk to fight

bacteria and viruses. Substances in breastmilk "coat" the baby's gut to prevent bacteria, viruses and proteins (that can cause allergies) from entering the baby's blood stream. Formula and solid foods can damage this protective layer. So a baby fed solid foods or formula before 6 months is at greater risk of infection, diarrhea and allergies.

Babies younger than 6 months lack the enzymes to fully digest cereals and the proteins in solid foods. This, too, can cause diarrhea.

Exclusive breastfeeding protects mother's milk supply.

Supplementing with formula and offering solid foods in the early months decreases mother's milk production. This is because the baby will drink less breastmilk. When the baby nurses less, the breasts make less milk. The relationship between the baby's needs and the supply of breastmilk has been disturbed...and the mother's milk supply decreases. Unfortunately, this leads to more supplementation and then even fewer breastfeeds. A downward spiral in the mother's supply can result, leading to undesired weaning.

Bottle feeding, especially in the first week of life, can interfere with how the baby learns to breastfeed. Mothers cannot compete with the fast flow of milk from a bottle before her milk becomes abundant around Days 3-5. Some babies are reluctant to nurse after bottle feeding for this reason, causing much frustration for both mother and baby.

Babies who are breastfed **exclusively** through the first 6 months are much more likely to reach the AAP's goal of nursing right through the first year of life.

Exclusive breastfeeding saves money and helps mom lose weight.

Formula is expensive. And powdered infant formula, the least expensive kind, is no longer recommended for babies under 2 months of age. It is not sterile and can contain harmful bacteria, which can make very young babies sick.

When solid foods are delayed until 6 months, feeding is easier and cheaper. There is no need to buy processed baby food. Older babies are able to eat pureed, shredded or mashed table food.

Mothers lose more weight and return to fertility later if solids are delayed until 6 months.

Solids and sleep.

Feeding solids to babies does **not** help them sleep through the night. Research shows that babies given solid foods have similar sleep patterns to those who are not.

In one study, researchers found that exclusively breastfeeding mothers got 40 minutes **more** sleep than mixed feeding mothers and formula feeding mothers.

What about iron?

Full term, healthy breastfed babies do not need supplemental iron for the first 6 months. They are born with a store of iron, *and* the iron in breastmilk is easily absorbed. Supplemental iron is not well absorbed and stays in the baby's gut. There it can feed bad bacteria, causing diarrhea or other illness.

Between 6 and 9 months of age, developmental changes increase babies' ability to absorb iron. When iron rich foods are introduced then, babies are protected from iron deficiency.

Do breastfed babies need extra Vitamin D?

Everyone needs vitamin D in order to absorb calcium and build strong bones. Up to three quarters of teens and adults in the U.S. are deficient in vitamin D. A mother's vitamin D levels affect the amount of vitamin D in her breastmilk. Because of this, the current recommendation is to supplement a breastfed infant with between 200 and 800 IU of vitamin D every day, unless his mother has a vitamin D blood level of 50 or above.

In addition to rickets (soft bones), vitamin D deficiency is possibly associated with poor immunity to infections, increased rates of cancer and increased autoimmune disease, including Type 1 Diabetes and multiple sclerosis.