

Ask the Pediatrician: What are the benefits of breastfeeding?

October 17 2022, by Lori Feldman-Winter, American Academy of Pediatrics



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Q: Is it clear that breastfeeding is the best choice for most babies? If I need to supplement with formula, is that OK?

A: Breastfeeding provides a lot of perks for [babies](#) and nursing parents. That's why the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends exclusive [breastfeeding](#) for a newborn's first six months, and continued breastfeeding as long as parent and baby wish after introducing solid foods.

But every family's situation is different. Not everyone can breastfeed or continue breastfeeding for as long they'd like for various reasons. You may choose to breastfeed for a shorter time or combine breastfeeding with [baby formula](#). Others may nurse their little ones for two years or more.

Giving your child at least some breast milk delivers real benefits. And even though exclusive breastfeeding is best in the beginning, this is not an all-or-nothing choice. In general, the longer you breastfeed, the greater the benefits will be to you and your baby, and the longer these benefits will last.

Human milk provides all the nutrients, calories and fluids needed for your baby's health. It supports your baby's brain development and growth and is easiest for your little one to digest.

Breastfeeding continues to deliver protective antibodies and other important proteins and compounds to protect your infant after leaving the womb. This boosts your baby's immunity to everything from the common cold to more serious conditions. In fact, research shows that breastfeeding offers protection from asthma, eczema, diabetes, obesity, leukemia, [tooth decay](#), ear infections, persistent diarrhea and much more. Studies also show that breastfeeding reduces your child's risks for Sudden Infant Death Syndrome as well as other causes of infant death,

and even is linked to higher IQ.

After giving your baby only [breast milk](#) for the first six months, you can continue breastfeeding as long as you and your baby wish. Nutritious solid foods, those with iron and zinc, should be introduced around six months. The only other thing you will need to give your baby is vitamin D drops, beginning soon after birth.

Feeding your baby will always provide snuggle time. But the physical, skin-to-skin contact of nursing helps create a special bond between you and your baby. Your baby will be comforted by the scent of your skin, the sound of your heartbeat and even the flavor of your milk. Breast milk has a naturally sweet taste, but also changes flavors depending on what you eat. No two meals are the same for your baby. This can have the added bonus of making them more likely to enjoy new foods you offer once they start eating solids.

When you breastfeed, your own health will benefit. It can help you recover from childbirth more quickly and easily. Hormones released during breastfeeding help the uterus return to its regular size more quickly and can reduce postpartum bleeding.

Breastfeeding changes your metabolism and physiology in such a way that it protects you against diabetes, high blood pressure and cancers of the breast and ovaries. It may also help keep bones strong, which helps protect against bone fractures in older age. It also triggers the release of oxytocin, a hormone that has been linked with feelings of empathy, affection, calm and positive communication.

For many nursing parents and babies, breastfeeding goes smoothly from the start. For others, it takes time and several attempts. Sore nipples, milk supply issues and the need to sit still for hours every day are very real issues. Talking with a midwife, lactation consultant or doctor trained

in breastfeeding right after birth can help. They can show you helpful techniques and breastfeeding positions that can help relieve nipple pain.

Your pediatrician or OB-GYN can check your breasts during your postpartum visit and suggest ways to ease any discomfort you're feeling.

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