Why Breastfeeding is Important

The benefits of breastfeeding have been well documented. Though it is most apparent during infancy, these benefits have enduring effects that promote optimal health throughout the life of the breastfed baby and his mother. Human milk is a complex, living substance with numerous disease-fighting and health-promoting ingredients; it is a complete infant support-system that provides both nutrition and protection. Breast milk contains immune molecules called antibodies that destroy germs. The mother’s immune system makes these antibodies and they constantly adapt. When a baby or mother is exposed to a new germ, the mother’s immune cells are activated and manufacture antibodies to combat that specific germ. These antibodies and disease-fighting cells will quickly appear in the milk and the mother will pass them to her baby at the next feeding. There are hundreds of human milk components that interact synergistically to both nourish and protect infants and young children. On the other hand, infant formula provides nutrition only: it has no benefit to the baby beyond basic nutrition.

Breastfeeding benefits women as well. Some of the benefits are long lasting and appear to remain with mothers for years after they have weaned their last child.

Benefits for Baby

- Breastfed babies have fewer colds, respiratory infections, ear infections, and occurrences of influenza.
- Breastfeeding is good for the digestive tract. Babies who are formula-fed are sixteen times more likely to have diarrhea than breastfed babies. Breastfeeding may protect against Crohn’s disease, irritable bowel syndrome, colitis, and celiac disease.
- Exclusively breastfeeding for at least three months reduces the risk of juvenile diabetes (Type I) by up to 30%. It also reduces the risk of developing late onset or Type II diabetes.
- Evidence suggests breastfed babies are less likely to develop high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and cardiovascular disease as adults.
- Breastfed infants have fewer childhood cancers and baby girls will have less chance of contracting breast and ovarian cancer as adults.
- Because breastfed babies get sick less often, there will be fewer doctor and hospital visits and less money spent on antibiotics and other medications.
- Breastfeeding for more than four months reduces the risk of hospitalization for a respiratory infection by 72%.
- Even when a breastfed baby gets sick, the illness is usually less severe and lasts a shorter time than the same illness in a baby not receiving mother’s milk.
- Exclusive breastfeeding lowers the risk of food allergies, asthma, eczema, and skin rashes.
- Breast milk contains high levels of certain fats that are required to support brain and nerve growth. Breastfed children have higher IQs, better developed neurological systems, and sharper vision.
- Breastfeeding promotes strong attachment. The act of breastfeeding insures that a baby will be in his mother’s arms many times every day; in fact a breastfed baby is touched and held almost twice as much as a formula-fed infant. Attachment is not a parenting style, but a biological necessity for normal mental health and optimal brain development.
Breastfed babies are less likely to develop adult obesity. The longer the baby is breastfed the lower the obesity risk. Breastfed infants regulate their intake according to their caloric needs and actually control their mothers’ milk production.

Breastfeeding reduces the risk of SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome) by 38%. One theory suggests that because breastfed babies sleep less deeply, they are more likely to arouse if having breathing difficulty. Breastfeeding’s protection from infection may also help lower the risk of SIDS.

Breastfeeding results in earlier development of an infant’s immune system.

Breastfeeding helps to develop mouth and facial muscles.

**Benefits for Mother**

- Breastfeeding enhances attachment. Every time a mom nurses her baby, she releases the hormone oxytocin. This hormone not only causes a mother to release her milk (the milk ejection or let-down reflex), but it makes her fall in love with her baby. It has been dubbed the “mothering” hormone.
- Oxytocin also provides another of breastfeeding’s great benefits: protecting women’s mental health. Oxytocin down-regulates stress. The effects of constantly lowering stress during breastfeeding persist long past weaning.
- Breastfeeding reduces the risk of breast and ovarian cancer. Breast cancer risk is reduced by 4.3 % for each year that a woman breastfeeds, and each additional pregnancy reduces the risk by 7 %—a decrease of as much as 60%. This benefit is dose-related and cumulative: the longer a mother breastfeeds, the lower her risk of developing breast cancer. The reasons for this reduced cancer risk are still unclear and complex, but new evidence points to the cycling history of mammary cells. The cycle of pregnancy, breastfeeding, and weaning may be important for the health of the breast. Weaning completes the cycle. Lower estrogen levels during breastfeeding may contribute to the decreased risk of both breast and ovarian cancer. Women who do not breast feed have a 1.5-fold increased risk of developing ovarian cancer.
- Breastfeeding reduces the risk of osteoporosis. New mothers experience a loss in bone density during the early months of breastfeeding; but as their fertility returns, their bones act like sponges, absorbing extra calcium. This results in greater bone density and stronger bones. Women who do not breastfeed have a four times higher risk of developing osteoporosis.
- Breastfeeding helps mothers lose weight. Making milk for one baby requires approximately 500 hundred calories a day. Weight loss during the first year after birth is significantly greater in women who breastfeed as compared to those women who do not. The greatest weight loss takes place between three and six months post partum.
- Women who breastfeed have a lowered risk of developing metabolic syndrome which is characterized by diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and cardiovascular disease. A recent theory suggests that breastfeeding reverses changes that occur in a woman’s body during pregnancy. These changes are increased fat stores, elevated blood pressure, cholesterol and triglycerides, and increased insulin resistance. In other words, during pregnancy women develop mild metabolic syndrome. Breastfeeding can actually reset these changes.
- Exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months can delay the return of ovulation and reduce the chance of conception.
- Breastfeeding moms experience improved sleep and relaxation. Evidence shows that breastfeeding women fall asleep more quickly and actually get more sleep.
- Breastfeeding encourages normal uterine contractions that not only control post partum bleeding, but return the uterus to the pre-pregnant state more rapidly than in non-breastfeeding mothers.
- Breastfeeding saves time. It is readily available, just the right temperature, and won’t be contaminated or improperly mixed.
- Breastfeeding mothers will miss fewer workdays because their babies are less likely to be sick.
Benefits for Dad

- Breastfeeding is cheaper. The cost of formula is $1,200-$1,800 a year. Other costs of not breastfeeding are:
  - More doctors office visit and more hospitalizations.
  - More need for antibiotics and other medication.
- Dads do not have to get up at night—although help is very appreciated, especially in the early weeks.
- Breastfed babies’ stools are less offensive than formula stools.
- Dads feel satisfied knowing their baby is receiving the best possible food that will enable their children to achieve optimal health.

Benefits for the World

- Breastfeeding is Green.

Increased breastfeeding would decrease health care costs worldwide. The US could save $13 billion each year on medical costs if 90% of women nursed their infants exclusively for the first six months. This estimate is based solely on the decreased cost of the care of babies, and does not include savings for the decreased health care costs of the nursing mothers.