

Breastfeeding vs. Bottle Feeding

Choosing how and what to feed your baby is a personal decision that deserves careful and thorough consideration. Breastfeeding is the natural nutritional source for infants less than one year of age.

Most health care professionals recommend breastfeeding for your baby's first year (including the American Academy of Pediatricians and the National Association of Pediatric Nurse Associates and Practitioners).

Breast milk is the best source of nutrition for the first 6 months of life. It contains appropriate amounts of carbohydrate, protein, and fat, and provides digestive enzymes, minerals, vitamins, and hormones that infants require. Breast milk also contains antibodies from the mother that can help the baby resist infections.

Experts agree that breastfeeding your baby for any length of time, regardless of how short, is of benefit to you and your baby.

You can provide your baby with breast milk by either breastfeeding or by feeding your baby breast milk from a bottle.

Breastfeeding your baby (directly from the breast):

- Can only be done by you

- Can be done exclusively or can be supplemented with bottle feedings

Feeding your baby breast milk (which has been expressed):

- Can be given with a bottle (by you or others)

- Requires regular pumping of milk from your breasts

- Requires appropriate handling and storage of milk

- Requires appropriate preparation of bottles and nipples

Most doctors advise strictly breastfeeding for the first couple of weeks, until breastfeeding is firmly established, rather than switching back and forth to a bottle. This recommendation is based on the possibility of nipple confusion, which can cause sucking and feeding problems for infants who are switched between breastfeeding and bottle-feeding. After two months of age, most babies adapt to bottle nipples easily.

Breastfeeding is a natural function but is not necessarily a natural instinct for mothers. It's a little like learning to ride a bike. During the first few weeks, you and your baby may struggle, and occasionally crash and burn. And then one day, you'll start peddling, and ride for miles -- it will be so easy you won't understand

why you were ever having so much trouble. Keep in mind that most mothers need information about how to feed their babies. Mothers also need support, encouragement, and assistance after birth to enjoy feeding and caring for their babies.

Advantages Of Breastfeeding

Research indicates that breastfed babies may have less frequent:

- Ear infections
- Stomach or intestinal infections
- Digestive problems, such as constipation or diarrhea
- Skin diseases (infantile eczema)
- Allergy problems (infantile allergies)
- Hospitalizations in the first year of life

In addition, breastfed babies may have less risk of becoming overweight or developing high blood pressure, diabetes, iron-deficiency anemia, and tooth decay. Compared to bottle fed babies, breast fed babies also have slightly higher I.Q.'s.

Moms who breastfeed their babies may enjoy:

- No bottle cleaning
- No formula preparation
- Lower cost
- Easier weight loss
- Less post-partum bleeding
- Enhancement of the unique bond between mother and child
- A reduced risk of breast, uterine, and ovarian cancer
- Reduced risk of diabetes later in life

Moms who breastfeed their babies should:

- Understand that ANY medications you take may enter the breast milk and affect your baby (check with your doctor or lactation consultant about which are safe, and do not stop any prescribed medication without discussing with your health care provider first)
- Maintain adequate nutrition
- Drink plenty of fluids, especially water, every day
- Get plenty of rest
- Take good care of her nipples and breasts
- Relax and enjoy the experience

Possible Problems

If you run into any problems, contact a lactation consultant. Moms who breastfeed may experience:

- Nipple soreness
- Breast engorgement
- Leaking breasts
- Let-down reflex (other than during breastfeeding)
- Difficulty knowing how much milk the baby is drinking
- Infection of the nipple or breast

Moms who breastfeed their babies may feel confused by lack of experience, or may be ashamed to ask for help. However, most problems can be easily managed with guidance from a lactation consultant.

Cow's milk by itself is not an adequate source of complete nutrition for infants. Commercially prepared formulas for bottle-feeding are adequate sources of nutrition for babies that do not breastfeed.

Other Factors

Some circumstances can change your plans to breastfeed. How and what your baby eats may ultimately depend on the infant's physical condition and your health after birth. However, with help from a consultant, most babies -- even premature babies -- can breastfeed.

Some babies are unable to adequately breast feed due to:

- Premature birth
- Small size
- Weak physical condition
- Difficulty sucking
- Birth defects of the mouth (cleft lip or cleft palate)

See your child's pediatrician or a lactation consultant if you have a breast infection or breast abscess, breast cancer or other cancer, previous surgery or radiation treatment, or inadequate milk supply (uncommon).

Some mothers are advised NOT to breastfeed due to health problems such as:

- Active, untreated tuberculosis
- HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) infection or AIDS
- Active herpes lesions on the breast
- Severe malnutrition

Hepatitis infection

Use of street drugs or uncontrolled alcohol use

Resources For Information, Questions, or Problems

Health care professionals such as physicians, dietitians, nurses, and nurse-midwives can answer questions about breastfeeding and bottle feeding. As mentioned, breastfeeding is not necessarily "second nature" to either the mother or baby. Many women are greatly helped by advice and tips from others, especially during the first days and weeks after the baby's birth.

Lactation counselors are specially trained in breastfeeding strategies. They can help you understand the entire process of breastfeeding. One quick consultation is all that most healthy moms and babies need. A trained counselor can detect special situations that may require more time or visits.