

The Benefits of Breastfeeding

WHO, UNICEF and Health Canada recommend breastfeeding for up to age two and beyond



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In 2001, the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF made the following recommendations for infant feeding: children should be exclusively breastfed for the first six months of life and thereafter should receive adequate and safe complementary food while breastfeeding continues for up to two years of age and beyond.(1) The Canadian Paediatric Society (CPS), Dieticians of Canada (DC), and Health Canada (HC) have endorsed these latest recommendations.(2)

As primary health-care practitioners, chiropractors are in position to discuss health and natural methods of healing by different means such as adjustments, nutrition and exercise. Every day in my clinic, pregnant patients ask for help to relieve the stresses of pregnancy. Some ask about the most natural, simplest way to feed a young child. Chiropractors who work in family practices should be knowledgeable in the basics of breastfeeding and be ready to direct patients to the appropriate resources.

Breastfeeding rates fell to an all-time low in the 1970s and '80s in North America but things are slowly beginning to change as more people are realizing the benefits that breastfeeding brings to both the mother and child.

Breast milk is the ultimate food because it adapts and changes composition as a child ages, which infant formula cannot do.(3) Colostrum, which is the first liquid the mother's breast secretes after childbirth, is very high in secretory immunoglobulin A, which helps the newborn fight off infections. Later, from the more mature milk, the baby still receives the same amount of secretory immunoglobulin A but it is diluted in proportion to the increased amount of milk consumed. The immunity transfer from

the mother is crucial since children take up to five years to fully develop their immune system.

Breast milk is easily digested, therefore resulting in less gas, colic and spitting up.(4) Research shows that breastfed children may have a lower risk of developing asthma, food allergies and eczema,(5, 6, 7) in addition to less frequent diarrhea, and fewer urinary tract, respiratory and ear infections.(8,9,10,11) Breastfeeding may help in the development of the nervous system and contribute to increased intelligence quotient.(12,13) Breastfed babies might also have a lower risk of childhood cancers, insulin dependent diabetes mellitus, and chronic bowel diseases.(14, 15, 16,17,18) Of greatest importance, breastfeeding affords the baby a closeness with its mother that bottle-feeding does not allow. The breast-feeding child immediately after birth starts to use the senses of smell, taste, and touch.

Research published in Pediatrics in May 2004 claims that the overall mortality rate is 21% lower for breastfed babies compared to non-breastfed, and suggests that the longer babies breastfeed, the lower their risk of dying prematurely.(19)

As the baby starts to suckle right after birth, the mother's body releases the hormone oxytocin, which helps contract the uterus, decreasing postpartum bleeding. Since milk production burns about 500 to 1,000 calories a day, the nursing mother returns to her pre-pregnancy shape or weight faster than the non-nursing mother.(20) Research shows that breastfeeding may reduce the risk of the mother developing breast, uterine and ovarian cancers.(21, 22, 23)

Nighttime feeding is convenient for the mother because there is no necessity to calculate and mix formula. Breast milk is always available and ready to use, making travelling with a young baby very easy. Nursing allows the mother to relax and rest during the day. It will require her to actually take the time to sit down and bond with her child. There's an economic benefit, too, since breastfeeding can annually save a family as much as \$1,500, the estimated cost of a year's worth of formula.

Chiropractors in family practice might make available pamphlets that give information on breastfeeding and breast-feeding resources. A breastfeeding-friendly clinic would include a quiet area for moms to nurse, and could even provide supplies such as a feeding pillow, wipes, and even diapers.

La Leche League International (LLLI) was started in the United States in 1965 by seven mothers who wanted to help others learn about breastfeeding. The league offers phone support, monthly meetings and continuing education. In Quebec, a group called Nourri-Source also provides telephone support as well as weekly meetings at community centres where new mothers can come to weigh their babies and ask questions of the nurses who are present.

Women can also contact an international board-certified lactation consultant (IBCLC) whose role is to assist moms and provide them with evidence-based facts to help ensure breast-feeding success. These consultants undergo extensive breast-feeding education and a written examination, and they must re-certify every five years. They typically work in private practice, hospitals or clinical settings.

As the baby gets older, stronger, and more practised, breast-feeding becomes easier and faster with time. A new mother should be encouraged to continue with breastfeeding as long as it is satisfying for both her and the baby.

Assisting the next generation to get the healthiest possible start in life is a rewarding experience. •

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