The importance of breastfeeding for you and your child with special health care needs

Breastfeeding your newborn infant until he or she is at least one year old is one of the greatest gifts a mother can give her child. Because infants with special needs often have lower immune systems, they will benefit from the values of breast milk.

A newborn baby will feed on the mother’s colostrum. Colostrum is a thick, yellowish liquid and is ideal as an infant’s first food. After three days, a mother will begin to produce mature milk, which will meet all of her infant’s nutritional needs. Breastfeeding is recommended up to 6 months of age, with continued breastfeeding along with appropriate foods up to one year of age or beyond.

Why is breastfeeding important to consider?

Compared to infants who are fed formulas, breastfed infants:

- Have a lower rate of sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS)
- Are less likely to suffer from diarrhea, ear infections, respiratory tract infections, and meningitis
- Have a lower risk of Crohn’s disease, ulcerative colitis, Hodgkin’s disease, childhood leukemia, and juvenile onset diabetes
- Are significantly protected against asthma and eczema
- Score higher on cognitive and IQ tests at school age and on vision tests
- May have lower risk of obesity in childhood and in adolescence
- Have fewer cavities and are less likely to require braces

Women who breastfeed:

- Are more likely to return to their pre-pregnancy weight
- Have a reduced risk of postpartum bleeding
- Report feeling more confident and less anxious as mothers
- Have a reduced risk for long-term obesity
- Are less likely to develop ovarian and premenopausal breast cancers
- Have a reduced rate of osteoporosis

Breastfeeding cues

A baby will show specific feeding cues to let a mom know when he or she is ready to eat. They may:

- Put their hands or fists to their mouth
- Make sucking motions with their mouth
- Turn their heads looking for the breast

As soon as a mother notices any of these cues, she should offer her breast to her baby. Do not wait until the baby is crying as it may be more difficult for him to latch on if he is upset. In the first few days, it is normal for a new mom to feel frustrated.
Breastfeeding guidelines

Healthy babies develop their own feeding schedules. As the baby grows and her stomach becomes larger, she will feed less frequently but usually at least every two to three hours for 15 to 20 minutes or longer per breast. A baby will let her mom know when she is finished.

Signs that an infant is getting enough milk:

- He has eight to ten wet diapers per day; the urine is clear or pale yellow and not deep yellow or orange.
- He has three to four bowel movements per day.
- He switches between short sleeping periods and wakeful, alert periods.
- He is satisfied and content after feedings.
- The mother’s breasts feel softer after she feeds her baby.

What should families focus on?

Families should focus on supporting a mother’s efforts to initiate and maintain breastfeeding for at least one year. Families and partners can be involved with both the mother and the baby by:

- Burping
- Getting up during the night
- Bringing the baby for a feeding
- Assisting with bathing, rocking, diapering
- Assisting with cleaning, shopping, meal preparation, and laundry
- Comforting mother while breast feeding (rubbing her neck, cuddling)
- Talking and singing to the baby
- Soothing the baby to sleep

Alternatives to breastfeeding

There are occasions with an infant is too weak or too ill to nurse at his mother’s breast. This is often the case for infants who are hospitalized in a Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU). In these instances, a woman should be instructed how to express her milk, including the colostrum, so it can be fed to her infant in an appropriate manner. Usually this is via a small tube inserted into the baby’s nose and down into the stomach. A mother’s breast milk is vital to her infant’s recovery as it boosts his immune system and eliminates many of the digestion problems occurring with artificially-prepared formula. Providing her breast milk gives the mother a sense that she is contributing to her infant’s health and well-being and increases the bond between the two.

Resources for families

Women’s Health—http://www.womenshealth.gov


National Healthy Mothers, Health Babies Coalition—http://www.hmhb.org


References


United States Breastfeeding Committee—http://www.usbreastfeeding.org/


Women’s Health—http://www.womenshealth.gov