Mother and Child Can Benefit From Breast-feeding

Though sometimes a controversial topic, breast-feeding is a natural and healthy way to start life with your baby. The American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Medical Association, and the World Health Organization all recommend breast-feeding, especially during the period right after birth, as a way to help prevent allergies and to protect babies against infection and lifelong health problems. As we head into National Breast-feeding Month, here's everything you need to know about the subject, for both mother and child.

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Although 75 percent of babies start out being breast-fed,only 15 percent are exclusively breast-fed six months later. And those numbers are lower for African Americans. According to a national survey by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, only 54 percent of African-American mothers reported attempting to breast-feed; in the Southeast, the rates that African-American mothers started breast-feeding were at least 20 percent lower than white mothers. In six states—Alabama, Arkansas, Kentucky, Louisiana,Mississippi and South Carolina—the percent of African-American women attempting to breast-feed was less than 45 percent.

These numbers fall short of Healthy People targets, federal goals to improve the overall healthof children in the United States. The program aims to have 75 percent of all women attempt to breast-feed, 50 percent of all women continue to breast-feed for six months, and 25 percent of women to breastfeed until their children area year old.

Why Breast-feeding Is Important

Both mother and child can benefit from breast-feeding,biologically and psychologically. First, let's take a look at the baby and hisor her first days.

In the first three days after birth, a woman produces a type of breast milk called colostrum (referred to as liquid gold). This thick,yellow milk is packed full of nutrients and antibodies, and though women often produce only a small amount, it's exactly the amount that fits in a baby's tiny stomach. Three to five days after birth, colostrum changes into mature milk.This milk is thinner and has fat, sugar, water and protein. This is the milk a baby will continue to drink as he or she grows. Why is this milk so important?Because it helps babies fight disease. Breast milk contains a unique combination of cells, hormones and antibodies that can't be found in formula milk. This combination means babies have lower rates of ear infections,diarrhea, asthma and obesity. And

according to the Department of Health and Human Services, some research shows that breast-feeding can reduce the risk of type 1 diabetes, leukemia and sudden infant death syndrome.

Mothers can benefit too. Life can be a little easier when you breast-feed. There are no bottles to sterilize or formulas to mix—though you will have to establish a routine and get used to breast-feeding in public.Breast-feeding can also save money. According to HHS, formula and feeding supplies can cost more than $1,500 a year, and since breast-fed babies are usually sick less often, parents save on medical costs as well. Some research also shows that breast-feeding can lower a woman's risk of type 2 diabetes,breast cancer, ovarian cancer and postpartum depression.

Finally, breast-feeding has psychological components. The physical contact helps newborns feel secure and comforted, and the skin-to-skin contact can boost a woman's oxytocin levels, which releases feelings of calm.And the act of breast-feeding can be a powerful bonding moment for mother and child.

Learning to Breast-feed

There are a few things you can do to prepare for breast-feeding.First, talk to your doctor about your plans to breast-feed and ask if your delivery center is set up to support it. Some hospitals, called baby-friendly hospitals and birth centers, have special procedures and staff (such as lactation consultants) to help mothers breast-feed. Next, you can take a breast-feeding class or hire a lactation consultant. This can teach you how to get your baby to latch, how to recognize the signs of a good latch, how to avoid common breast-feeding challenges (like sore nipples, plugged ducts and breast infections) and how often and when to breast-feed as well as how to pump and store milk.

Breast-feeding in Public

Though you may feel uncomfortable about breast-feeding in public, know that you have the right to do so. Federal and state laws protect women who are nursing, and these laws are based on recommendations from organizations like the American Academy of Pediatrics, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) and the World Health Organization (WHO), all of which have stated that breast-feeding is the healthiest choice for both mother and baby.

To find out what the laws are in your state, click here.

Alternatives to Breast-feeding

There are alternatives to breast-feeding. Should you decide that breast-feeding isn't right for you or your family, talk to your doctor about choosing a formula. Though formula can't provide the antibodies that breast milk can, it can provide all the nutrients your baby needs. Bottle-feeding provides its own benefits: The mother has more freedom and time; other caregivers can get involved in the feeding process; there is no need to worry about how the mother's diet or medications will affect breast milk; and it is easier to track exactly how much food a baby is getting.

Where to Start

To get more information about the health benefits of breast-feeding,your legal rights to do it, how to do it and what you can expect while doing it,check out the World Health Organization or HealthyChildren.org (from the American Academy of Pediatrics). And for more information on National Breast-feeding month, click here.

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