

Breastfeeding...The Choice is Yours

We have all heard that breastfeeding is the healthiest way to feed your baby. But, what exactly does that mean? Breastfeeding is more than just "feeding". It is unique in the way your baby continues to grow and develop and will receive the protection against many health risks only breast milk can give. In fact, it is so good that it is the only food or drink a baby needs for the first six months of life! Breastfeeding continues when family foods are started at six months and for up to two years or longer.

Many women make their choice to feed their baby by what has traditionally or culturally been accepted, that is, what their mothers, other family members and their friends have done. According to the

Baby Friendly Initiative and the World Health Organization, women need to make informed decisions about how they will feed their babies based on current evidence (research).

Let's look at breastmilk:

Breastmilk is so much more than a food. It is a living fluid with many immune factors which give a baby continuous active protection against infections, when the baby's body cannot yet protect itself. There are over 200 live components in breastmilk that protect your baby's health. For the first few days after birth, a mother provides the ideal immunization for her baby with colostrum, which is very rich in antibodies. The amount of colostrum is small, but it is exactly what a baby needs at this time. The colostrum stays in the breastmilk the whole time the mother is breastfeeding, so the baby continues to get the health protection. Breastfeeding gives your baby's intestines a protective coating. This helps your baby fight harmful bacteria and viruses. Breastmilk changes at every feeding as your baby grows. Breastmilk meets all your baby's nutritional needs for first 6 months of life.

Breastfeeding protects your baby from ear infections, chest infections, bladder infection, upset stomach, diarrhea and vomiting. Breastfeeding may protect your baby from heart disease and high blood pressure later in life. There are unique fats found in breastmilk that boost brain power.

Liquid and powder formulas do contain nutrients. The nutrients in formulas are quite different from those in human milk as they come from animals or plants and have been changed to be as close to breastmilk as possible. Formulas have improved over what they used to be, but they are missing the live components that protect health only found in breastmilk. Babies who are not breastfed may be sick more often, have less protection from childhood cancers, bowel diseases and diabetes and are at higher risk of SIDS (sudden infant death syndrome) or crib death.

Let's look at breastfeeding:

Breastfeeding teaches your baby to eat when hungry and stop when satisfied. A breastfed baby cannot be overfed because they learn to regulate their appetite and hunger. It is much easier to overfeed a formula fed baby as the milk flows easily from a bottle, and baby may have too much before they realize that they are full. Because a breastfed baby has to work for their food, their jaw

muscles and teeth develop properly. It is about supply and demand - if you breastfeed at some feedings and give formula at other feedings, you will make less breastmilk.

Breastfeeding protects YOUR health, too. It reduces your chances of getting postpartum depression, breast cancer, ovarian cancer, diabetes, osteoporosis and other health problems. It can help you get back to your pre-pregnancy weight more quickly.

Breastfeeding strengthens the bond between you and your baby. The warmth, comfort and eye contact you share while breastfeeding will help you and your baby grow close.

The Baby Friendly Council of Newfoundland and Labrador has just released a new resource on breastfeeding to help women in their decision making process, entitled, *Feeding your Baby "So... You have a Decision to Make."* Go to www.babyfriendlynl.ca.

You should feel good about your choice. It should feel right for you and your family. Whatever you decide, your health care providers will give you the information and support you need. If you would like more information about breastfeeding, please see www.westernhealth.nl.ca or contact your local Community Health Office.

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