

October 2011

Steeped!



Breast Milk: Nature's Perfect Food for Your Baby

Our first relationship in life is with our mother—the one who brings us into this world, the one we instinctively listen and reach out for in our first few moments, the one who nurtures us in so many ways. While a doting father and loving relatives can be an indispensable source of help to a new mother, she is the only one that can nourish a newborn in the most perfect way. Breastfeeding is the reason that most children worldwide make it past the age of five - although it has not always been a “given” for everybody. Historically, breastfeeding rates were higher in less developed and rural nations, while the wealthier classes instead opted for wet-nurses and years later, formulas. This year, Canada celebrates World Breastfeeding Week from October 1-7 (interestingly enough, the rest of the world observes WBW from August 1-7) to promote greater acceptance of breastfeeding. Although it is ultimately a woman's choice whether or not she decides to breastfeed, the World Health Organization (WHO) recommends that, “infants start breastfeeding within one hour of life, are exclusively breastfed for six months, with timely introduction of adequate, safe and properly fed complementary foods while continuing breastfeeding for up to two years of age or beyond”¹. Both Health Canada and the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long Term Care are also striving to have new mothers meet the six month mark² since there appears to be greater health benefits the longer breastfeeding is continued.



Photo originally appears at <http://photobucket.com/images/breastfeeding%>

Benefits of Breastfeeding:

Choosing to breastfeed a newborn is not without its challenges: from sore nipples, to mastitis and even to friends and family that may be uncomfortable with your choice. However, there is very strong evidence to support that “Breast is Best” in almost all cases.

- Lower incidences of sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS), otitis media (ear infections), diarrhea, respiratory infections, necrotizing enterocolitis, atopic dermatitis and asthma³
- Improved fine motor coordination and communication skills at ages 1-3 years for breast fed babies⁴
- Increased immune function in newborns, as maternal milk offers antibodies that protect a new born from many infections while the immune system is still developing⁴
- Lower rates of child obesity, type 1 and 2 diabetes³, decreased risk of hypertension (high blood pressure) and hypercholesterolemia (high cholesterol) for breast fed babies as adults⁵
- Decreased risk of breast and ovarian cancer, type 2 diabetes and osteoporosis and hip fractures to the mother³
- Nursing a child suppresses ovulation and thus acts as a natural birth control
- Increased emotional and physical bonding time between mother and baby
- Inexpensive, no equipment needed, breast milk is always available and at the perfect temperature
- Opportunity to teach older siblings in the family about reproductive health and increase awareness to friends and family

Why then, if it is the healthiest choice to make for your baby do women opt to limit the time they breastfeed? Perhaps there is a lack of information or they are not sure who to turn to when they are having difficulties. Formula-

feeding may be easier (and there are all those free samples from the hospital!), especially if the woman has a lot of demands on her time, is frequently away from her baby and has had a lot of pain when attempting to breastfeed. Maybe she is getting the message from her husband, her family, her friends and even the general public that breast-feeding should only be done in private or is distasteful in some way. In any case, there are a lot of complex societal values tied up in the idea of what is and is not appropriate when it comes to breastfeeding. It is interesting to note that so many marketing strategies are hinged on the idea that “sex sells” (with breasts being a part of that formula), yet somehow there still seems to be a stigma about women breastfeeding in public and using their breasts not as a sexual appendage but as a tool to feed their families. Perhaps this paradoxical sense of exhibitionism/modesty is one reason that some women give up breastfeeding long before six months. Perceptions aside, there are many groups like La Leche League, public health units and the Academy of Breastfeeding Medicine that are working to not only normalize breastfeeding, but also to celebrate it as the best possible choice: “Breastfeeding is a human rights issue for both mother and child. Children have the right to the ‘highest attainable standard of health,’ which entails the right to be breastfed, and women have the right to breastfeed as related to self-determined reproductive rights”. The Charter of Rights and Freedoms specifically protects women who breastfeed such that a woman has the right to feed her child anywhere at anytime, free from discrimination (this includes being asked to move, cover up, or be more “discreet”).

Botanical Breastfeeding Boosters:

For women that are interested in doing things “the natural way” and for those that are in need of stimulating milk production there are some herbal options available. Galactagogues are a class of herbs that help to increase lactation and every culture has a few traditional remedies. In a recent clinical study, breast-feeding mothers that drank Fenugreek (*Foeniculum vulgare*) tea daily had newborns that re-gained birth weight much faster in comparison to both placebo and control groups⁸. Milk thistle (*Silybum marianum*) has also been shown to significantly increase milk production with no side effects⁹. Other herbs that are commonly used include fenugreek (*Trigonella foenum-graceum*), Goat’s rue (*Galega officinalis*) and Caraway (*Carum bulbocastanum*). Combining galactagogue herbs with red raspberry leaf (*Rubus idaeus*) can be especially helpful for a new mother, since raspberry acts as a uterine tonic (toning the uterus and encouraging it to shrink back to its normal size more quickly¹⁰). Although these herbs are generally considered to be safe, please consult a health professional who is familiar with the use of botanicals prior to taking any supplements.



Fennel Seeds. Image originally appears at http://www.ifood.tv/network/fennel_seed

For more information regarding breastfeeding, please contact:

- **La Leche League Canada**, 1-800-665-4324
- **Motherisk** 1-877-439-2744
- **INFACT Canada** <http://www.infactcanada.ca/>
- **Local Public Health Unit**
- **“Breast Feeding Matters”**. http://www.beststart.org/resources/breastfeeding/pdf/breastfeeding_matters_eng_finl.pdf

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