

## Breastfeeding as Obesity Prevention

**D**eciding to breastfeed your baby benefits both you and your baby. There are many health benefits to your child from breastfeeding, including prevention of infections such as ear infections, diarrhea, and other bacterial and viral infections. Research also suggests that breastfeeding may help protect against diabetes and some cancers. Breastfeeding provides warmth and closeness between you and your baby. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends breastfeeding your child for the first year of life.

Breastfeeding also provides many benefits for mothers. Mothers who breastfeed tend to lose pregnancy weight more quickly. Hormones released during breastfeeding help to return the uterus to its normal size and can prevent postpartum bleeding. Research shows that women who have breastfed have lower chances of getting ovarian cancer and breast cancer later in life. Many mothers also feel joy and fulfillment from the connection they experience with their child while nursing.

One important health benefit of breastfeeding is prevention of obesity. Obesity is one of the most serious health problems facing both children and adults today. Childhood obesity often leads to adult obesity, which causes many health problems including heart disease, diabetes, and even early death. Researchers are learning more about how breastfeeding can help prevent obesity. Breast milk provides your baby with food that is easy to digest and very nutritious, and your child helps decide how much to eat and when to eat it. Both the breast milk itself and the way your baby feeds help him or her to develop healthy eating patterns. Breastfed babies seem to be better able to regulate their food intake and thus are at lower risk for obesity.

Because breastfeeding provides food for your baby that is easy to digest and nutritious, you do not need to feed your baby solid foods until he or she is 6 months old. "Early introduction of solids," or feeding your child solid food such as cereal or jarred baby food, is linked to risks for food allergies and higher risks of obesity. This is another good reason to give your baby the healthy nutrition that breast milk provides. Recent data indicate that overweight babies are at higher risk for being overweight or obese during later childhood.

The first weeks of breastfeeding provide both new joys and new challenges for breastfeeding moms, and many resources exist to help support moms through this time. A research study in this month's *Archives* describes a nurse home visiting program designed to improve breastfeeding rates. Other resources to help mothers who breastfeed include the following:

- The American Academy of Pediatrics provides a wealth of information on breastfeeding, including frequently asked questions, sections for fathers to



read to learn about breastfeeding, and sections on how to understand your baby's cues about when he or she is hungry or has had enough milk (<http://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/baby/breastfeeding/Pages/default.aspx>).

- La Leche League is an organization with the goal of promoting breastfeeding. They provide support, information, and encouragement to promote breastfeeding. Many cities have chapters that can provide information and support in person (<http://www.llli.org/>).

- Lactation consultants are people with special training in breastfeeding. Many hospitals have lactation consultants as staff that can help you get started with breastfeeding when you are in the hospital. These consultants can answer questions and help with difficulties.

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