

Breastfeeding



DOES IT REALLY MATTER?

Numerous medical and public health organizations have position statements and web sites devoted to breastfeeding, including extensive research on the health benefits of breastfeeding, data on breastfeeding rates, how-to breastfeed guides, and action plans to help communities create a supportive environment for breastfeeding families (1)(2).



Breastfeeding Rates in Nebraska

Medical and public health experts recommend that babies exclusively breastfeed (no additional solids, formula, or water) for six months, with breastfeeding to continue for at least two years for optimal maternal and child health outcomes. After six months of age, as a baby continues to breastfeed, complementary solid foods are introduced. Breastfeeding rates in the United States were lowest in the 1960s. Over the past 35 years, extensive research and community support have resulted in a steady increase in the number of mothers who breastfeed. The latest CDC data for babies born in 2022 reports that 91.2% of Nebraska babies were ever breastfed, while only 61.3% were exclusively breastfeeding at 3 months, and only 36.7% were exclusively breastfeeding at six months.



Human Milk

Human milk is rich in macro- and micro-nutrients, antibodies, and enzymes that promote optimal growth and development and protect an infant. Babies digest human milk easily; its composition changes throughout the day, and as a baby matures, to match the unique needs of a human infant. Human milk has not been duplicated in the laboratory setting. Newly identified components in human milk, and their role in growth and development and protection, continue to be identified.

Infant Health Benefits

The most comprehensive meta-analysis of breastfeeding research concludes that breastfeeding decreases the risk of acute otitis media, non-specific gastroenteritis, severe lower respiratory tract infections, atopic dermatitis, asthma in young children, obesity, type I and type II diabetes, childhood leukemia, sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) and necrotizing enterocolitis (4).

The early skin-to-skin contact of breastfeeding has physical and emotional benefits for moms and babies.

Emerging research continues to focus on the relationship between breastfeeding and baby's healthy gut biome, their brain development, and central nervous system regulation.

Maternal Health Benefits

How a mother feeds her baby also impacts her health. Breastfeeding is associated with a decreased risk of breast, ovarian, endometrial, and colorectal cancers.

Women who breastfeed are at lower risk for type II diabetes and cardiovascular diseases, including strokes and heart attacks, as well as high cholesterol, high blood pressure and less accumulation of belly fat. The hormones associated with breastfeeding also play a protective role in reducing the risk of postpartum mood disorders.



Societal Benefits

- Parents miss less work when their babies are fed human milk. The 2010 Affordable Care Act requires employers to provide private space and reasonable breaks for breastfeeding mothers of infants under one year of age. The 2022 PUMP Act further expanded the rights of mothers in the workforce by adding an enforcement clause. Workplace support is vital as 70% of Nebraska mothers return to the labor force after giving birth and Nebraska is one of 37 states that does not guarantee any amount of paid maternity leave.
- A 2024 analysis of high-income countries determined that low breastfeeding rates cost the U.S. over \$100 billion annually based on increased health care costs, premature deaths, and decreased intelligence (5).
- Formula feeding results in a large environmental footprint due to transportation and production costs involved with converting cow's milk to a digestible formula for human infants.
- When low-income mothers breastfeed, they are more self-sufficient and require fewer tax-supported food program subsidies. Formula is a \$4 billion industry; 50% of formula is purchased by the federal government with tax-payer dollars and distributed via the Women Infant and Children food supplement program (WIC). If a mother does not qualify for WIC, a family will need to purchase ~\$1,500 to \$3,000 worth of formula to feed their baby.
- The breastfeeding process is designed to calm and quiet a baby. Many social scientists feel that the intimacy of breastfeeding is linked to increased brain development and enhanced social skills that are vital in today's rapidly changing world.

References

1. Including, but not limited to, the U.S. Surgeon General, the US Department of Health and Human Services Office on Women's Health, the Centers for Disease Control, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Public Health Association, the American College of Nurse Midwives, the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, and the American Academy of Family Medicine.
2. <http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/calls/breastfeeding/index.html> The US Surgeon General released a Call to Action to Support Breastfeeding in January 2011. This web site contains the Executive Summary, as well as a How to Breastfeed guide and an Action Plan outlining how communities can support breastfeeding mothers.
3. www.cdc.gov/breastfeeding. The Centers for Disease Control issues a Breastfeeding Report Card with data for the country as a whole and for each state. This site includes the 2013 Guide to Strategies to Support Breastfeeding Mothers and Babies, and a report on Breastfeeding Progress in the US.
4. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/19827919/>
5. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/39087279/>