

Just why is breast best?



It's World Breastfeeding Week from 1st-7th August and it's celebrated in more than 170 countries worldwide. Priya Tew reminds us of the reasons why breast is best for baby.

Breastfeeding provides the baby with the best start in life as the milk the mother makes is specifically tailored to her baby. Colostrum is the first milk, made from the latter stages of pregnancy; it is perfect for newborns providing high levels of protein, vitamins A, E and K and immunoglobulins (particularly IgA). These protect the intestinal mucosa by fighting the multiplication of bacteria and pathogens in the digestive tract. For example, exclusive breastfeeding for more than three months has been shown to lower the risk of ear infections, eczema, sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) and type 1 diabetes.

Breastfeeding is also good for the mother, it allows close bonding with the baby and breastfeeding, for some, can be used for comfort as well as for nutrition. It has also been shown to protect women against breast cancer and can help with post-pregnancy weight loss. The benefits go on and on including improvements in the cognitive development of infants and epidemiological evidence also suggests that breastfeeding is linked to a reduced incidence of obesity in adulthood and adolescence.

Breast milk itself contains a range of immune factors, digestive enzymes, hormones

and growth factors, so it not only feeds the baby but helps baby to digest the milk, protects against disease and also aids growth. The human body is amazingly clever, for example, the composition of breast milk changes to suit the needs of the baby. At the start of a feed 'foremilk' is produced which is high in protein and lactose. 'Hindmilk' is produced later on which is lower in protein but higher in fat and energy. The composition of milk will also vary over a 24-hour period ensuring baby gets a balanced intake and all the nutrition she needs.

Feeding should be on demand, led by the baby and the baby should be asking for a feed at least every two or three hours. The supply of breast milk is a demand-led process. When the baby feeds, prolactin levels increase in the mother, which in turn, boosts milk supply. Supply is also dependant on the regular removal of milk from the breasts, so regular feeding is key.

Wherever possible, breastfeeding should be encouraged, however it is not always easy. Breastfeeding is a new skill that takes time for mum and baby to master and for some mums it just doesn't work out. The health of the mother and the baby need to always be paramount. Some mother will either choose not to breastfeed,

not be able to breastfeed or choose to combination feed and will therefore need support and guidance in making these decisions. Many mums will start off breastfeeding and change over to formula after a few months.

Formula is the best alternative to breast milk as these milks have been specially tailored to make them suitable for infants. Cow's milk is not recommended until after one year as it does not contain enough vitamin E or enough essential fatty acids and it also contains too much protein, sodium and potassium. The fat and protein compositions are also different to that of human milk. Human breast milk

is whey dominant containing alpha-lactalbumin, lactoferrin and immunoglobulins whereas cow's milk is casein dominant, making it difficult for infants to digest. Whey dominant formula's have had the casein reduced to bring them closer in composition to breast milk. Although it is not possible to add in the immunological and hormonal factors that breast milk provides, these milks have been designed to be as close to human milk as possible. They provide the appropriate levels of protein, fat, carbohydrate, vitamins and minerals to sustain the rapid growth and development that occurs without stressing the infant's body. **dt**

