

# Benefits and Advantages to Breast Feeding

*By Dee Murphy, RD, LD, CBE*

If women knew they had something that could lessen their child's risk of sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS), obesity, diarrhea, childhood cancers, asthma, and cardiovascular disease while also increasing his/her intelligence, would they give it? What if women knew that by doing this they could also decrease their own chances of developing breast cancer? If women knew that they would need to give this special something to their baby for at least six months, and that the longer they did it the healthier both they and their child might be, would they eagerly do it? Breastfeeding one's baby is this special something and almost all women are able to do it. Here are some facts:

- The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) and the World Health Organization (WHO) advise women to exclusively breastfeed their infants for six months and to continue breastfeeding for 12 to 24 months.
- Exclusive breastfeeding, giving no other food or fluid besides breast milk, has been shown to help guard against some diseases.

## Breastfeeding Helps Prevent Overweight and Obesity

- Overweight and obesity are not diseases, but are associated with high blood pressure, high cholesterol, high triglycerides, and elevated insulin levels, all of which can lead to disease. These problems are becoming more widespread in overweight children who may grow into overweight adults.
- Infant weight gain might be related to the risk of becoming overweight in children. Research has shown that rapid weight gain during the first four months of life is associated with an increased risk for becoming overweight in childhood.
- Breastfeeding may help prevent excessive weight gain in infancy. Infants who are breastfed may not gain weight as rapidly as those who are bottle fed.
- Both longer breastfeeding duration and exclusivity have shown a protective effect against becoming overweight in childhood.



## Breastfeeding Lowers Breast Cancer Risks

- Giving birth reduces a woman's risk of breast cancer by 7.0%. Every year that a woman breastfeeds further reduces the risk by 4.3%.
- The longer a woman breastfeeds, the lower her breast cancer risk; especially in women who breastfeed for at least 2 years.
- One large study showed that if women in developed countries had 2.5 children, on average, but breastfed each child for 6 months longer than they currently do, about 25,000 breast cancers would be prevented each year. If each child were breastfed for an additional 12 months about 50,000 breast cancers might be prevented annually.
- Long-term breastfeeding does not guarantee total protection from breast cancer; however it may reduce the risk of cancer development or simply delay the occurrence of breast cancer in younger women. More research is needed to know which one is true.

Both overweight/obesity and breast cancer are complex issues and breastfeeding is only part of the solution. However, good health begins by developing healthful habits early in life. Breastfeeding your baby may be the best place to start.

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