

The Benefits of Breast-Feeding Surprises About the Value of Breast-Feeding

The extent and range of benefits that breast-feeding provides to infants, mothers and even the community at large is compelling.

The scientific research on the health benefits of human milk for infant feeding is extensive and fairly conclusive. In recent years, breast-feeding has been proven to improve the digestive health, intellectual and motor development, chronic disease risk, psychological welfare and immune system strength of babies.

But the broad and pervasive benefits extend far beyond the health of the breast-fed infant. As the research base expands, the superiority of breast-feeding over alternative feeding becomes clearer. In addition to significant health benefits for the mother and the child, breastfeeding provides additional economic benefits for the household, the health system, employers and society.¹

The multitude of health conditions that breastfeeding has been proven to reduce in infants includes:

- Sudden infant death syndrome
- Lymphoma
- Leukemia
- Diabetes
- Obesity
- Asthma

In addition, studies show that lactating or nursing mothers have consistently decreased risks of cancer, fractures and post-menopausal osteoporosis.

But some of the lesser known and increasingly documented benefits of breastfeeding affect society in general, with growing evidence that apart from being the safest and healthiest infant feeding method, breast-feeding is also the least expensive. Some estimates place the overall economic benefits of breast-feeding in the United States alone at \$3.6 billion.² This includes not only the financial benefits to the household, but to the health care system (with reductions in illness and disease) and the general economy (from reduced absenteeism and associated financial burdens).

But of course, the decision to breast-feed rests with parents and their physicians. There are many reasons why some mothers can't breast-feed, such as health conditions or the inability to produce enough milk. It's important to discuss any problems you may be having with a treating physician. For any questions or concerns about breast-feeding, or your health, your Best Doctors benefits can be invaluable in clarifying or expanding your knowledge on breastfeeding or pregnancy in general, with straightforward, comprehensive information on your diagnosis.

1. Breastfeeding and the use of human milk, by Gartner LM, Morton J, Lawrence RA, Naylor AJ, O'Hare D, Schanler RJ, Eidelman AI, American Academy of Pediatrics Section on Breastfeeding, Pediatrics [01 Feb 2005, 115(2):496-506]

2. Quantifying the Benefits of Breastfeeding: A Summary of the Evidence, by León-Cava N, Lutter C, Ross J, Martin L, PAHO paper, <http://files.enonline.net/attachments/421/bobcontents-and-introduction-summary.pdf>

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