

Making suburban Cook County a healthier place to live, work and play

Exclusive Breastfeeding: Benefits and Importance

By Sadie Wych, HealthConnect One

What is exclusive breastfeeding?

A baby is considered exclusively breastfeeding when it receives **only** breast milk and does not consume any other food or fluid.

Recommendations for Exclusive Breastfeeding

The current recommendation for infant feeding is **exclusive** breastfeeding for the **first six months** of life. This recommendation is supported by the American Academy of Pediatrics, American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, American Academy of Family Physicians, Academy of Breastfeeding Medicine, World Health Organization and the United Nations Children's Fund.

Why Is Exclusive Breastfeeding Important?

As of 2007, only **11.2%** of infants in Illinois met recommendation of exclusive breastfeeding for six months. In fact, Illinois is below the national average and far below the Healthy People 2020 Objectives (national objectives for promoting health and preventing disease set every 10 years).

For the nearly 90% of babies in Illinois who do *not* meet the recommendation, the effects are felt by both mother and child in the form of less protection against lower respiratory tract infections, ear infections, eczema and childhood obesity. More specifically, the benefits include:

For Babies' Health

Reduces Acute Otitis Media (Middle Ear Infections)

- Infants who are fed a combination of breast milk and formula are twice as likely to suffer from ear infections compared to infants that are exclusively breastfed.
- When exclusive breastfeeding is stopped between four and six months the likelihood of recurrent ear infections is double that of infants who are exclusively breastfed for six months.

Reduces Gastrointestinal Infections

- Studies have shown that infants who breastfeed exclusively for six months are less likely to get gastrointestinal infections compared to those that were breastfed for less than three months.
- One study found that infants who were breastfed exclusively until the age of four months were less likely to suffer from gastrointestinal infections until six months of age.

Reduces Upper and Lower Respiratory Infections

- One study found that infants who were breastfed exclusively until the age of four months were less likely to have had respiratory infections at six months of age. For lower respiratory infections, the benefit was also seen from seven to 12 months of age. Those who were fed a combination of breast milk and formula, even up to six months, did not show any reduced risk.

- Another study found that infants who stopped breastfeeding between four and six months were four times more likely to get pneumonia as compared to infants who were breastfed for at least six months.
- Exclusively breastfeeding for at least four months lowers the chance of hospitalization for lower respiratory diseases by 72%.

Promotes Optimal Growth and Development

- Exclusive breastfeeding has an even greater protective effect against a child becoming overweight than breastfeeding combined with formula. For each month of exclusive breastfeeding (up to nine months) the odds of being overweight decreased by 6%.
- Exclusively breastfeeding for six months provides the perfect amount of calories and nutrients to achieve optimal growth and development and does not result in insufficient gains in weight or length.

For Mothers' Health

- Mothers who exclusively breastfeed lose weight more rapidly after birth.
- Mothers who exclusively breastfeed also experience delayed return of menstrual periods, which decreases the chance of pregnancy soon after birth. Spacing between pregnancies prevents adverse perinatal outcomes such as preterm birth, low birth weight and small for gestational age.

Other Benefits

Exclusive breastfeeding is financially beneficial because it decreases the need for and use of medical care for infant illnesses and does not require the purchase of infant formula. Exclusive breastfeeding also increases the productivity of parents with infants because it lowers the amount of days that are taken off of work to care for sick children. If 90% of US families complied with the exclusive breastfeeding recommendations, **the estimated savings in direct and indirect costs would be \$13 billion with an estimated 911 deaths prevented annually.**

Although the benefits of breastfeeding are very well known, Illinois still falls far behind on rates of *exclusive breastfeeding*. Illinois' maximum health potential will not be realized as long as infant feeding includes supplementation, and breastfeeding duration and exclusivity are not considered a priority. The evidence is clear – we must recommend implementation of programs and services that promote exclusive breastfeeding, such as the Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative and peer-based support for women.

For more information on the benefits of breastfeeding, please contact Beth Pellettieri, Communities Putting Prevention to Work Project Manager, HealthConnect One, at bpellettieri@healthconnectone.org or visit www.healthconnectone.org.