The Benefits of Breastfeeding.

Breastfeeding benefits the infant, mother and community. The NH&MRC[1] describe breastfeeding as the physiological norm, providing beneficial effects on the nutritional, health and psychological make-up of the infant, and health benefits for the mother. The infants rapid growth and development at a time when digestive and excretory systems are still immature demands optimum nutrition. Exclusive breastfeeding from birth until 6 months of age provides the best nutritional start to infants[2]. Breastmilk is a product formulated over millions of years of mammalian evolution to meet the nutritional requirements of the infant in the nexus between placental detachment at birth and the capacity to obtain nutrition from exogenous sources.

In the longer term, breastfeeding has been associated with decreased risks of:

- physiological reflux[3]
- pyloric stenosis[4]
- juvenile diabetes[5]
- inflammatory bowel disease[6]
- some childhood cancers[7]
- delayed onset of coeliac disease[8,9]
- obesity[10]

Lactation also shows some protective effects for the mother against:

- premenopausal breast cancer[11], and
- osteoporosis[12]

Resistance to infection is recently cited as an important immunological benefit of breastfeeding. Breastmilk contains a number of known and unknown immunological factors that confer protection in the infants first 3-6 months whilst its own immune

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system is immature. Breastmilk continues to offer some protection throughout the entire course of lactation[13] .

Clinically breastfeeding has been shown to protect infants against:

- otitis media[14]
- urinary tract infection[15]
- bacterial meningitis[16]
- Sudden Infant Death syndrome[17]
- necrotising enterocolitis[18]
- severe respiratory illness, particularly in households where parents smoke[19].

An association has been demonstrated between breastfeeding and the neurodevelopment of pre-term[20], small for gestational age[21] and term infants. For pre-term infants, not being breastfed before discharge from hospital discharge has been associated with IQ differences at 7-8 years that is roughly equivalent to loss of cognitive potential caused by low level lead exposure[20].

Developmental studies have shown increased responsiveness and enhanced cognitive performance amongst breastfed and previously breastfed children up to the age of 7-8 years[22,23]. Although these studies demonstrate a relationship between breastfeeding and cognitive development, meta-analyses have indicated difficulty distinguishing the effect of breastfeeding from confounding factors in research design such as mothers' intelligence.[24] Recent research indicated a positive effect on cognitive development regardless of maternal intelligence[25], however further research is required in this area.

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