



Breastfeeding Newsletter

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Breastmilk provides immunity against illnesses

By Brittany Dain, Breastfeeding Peer Counselor

Along with flu season come concerns about breastfeeding while sick. Many breastfeeding mothers who catch a flu or a bug are approached by concerned friends and family members questioning whether they should still breastfeed while they are sick. The answer is YES, they should still breastfeed!

When babies are first born, breastfeeding is important for building a strong immune system. Breastmilk is the most nutritious food a baby can get, but it also provides needed immunity to protect babies against disease. Newborns are largely unprotected from the world they are born into, facing organisms they have never met. An infant can produce antibodies efficiently by about six months old although their immune system is not fully developed until they are four or five years old. Therefore it is important to breastfeed as long as possible.

Breastmilk contains ingredients that guard against viruses, fungi and parasites. It provides lactobacillus bifidus, which prevents the growth of dangerous bacteria.

Because breast milk contains these things, it is the best food for babies, even when the mother has a contagious illness. When breastfeeding mothers are exposed to a virus, their body starts making antibodies that are provided in her breastmilk. These antibodies help the baby fight the virus. A baby who is fed only infant formula lacks this protection found in breastmilk, yet they most likely will still be exposed and susceptible to catching their mother’s contagious illness because they are in close contact with their mothers. This is especially true considering illnesses can be spread before symptoms occur.

When a baby is sick, breastfeeding is especially important for comfort and keeping the baby hydrated. Many babies will instinctively nurse more often when exposed to an illness in order to fight it off more efficiently. It should also be noted that breastfeeding mothers whose baby has a stomach virus are usually advised by the pediatrician to continue breastfeeding. Many people think that because “breastmilk” has the word “milk” in it, that it is a dairy product, and that it should not be given to a baby with a sour stomach. Breastmilk is not considered a “dairy product,” so this is not the case.

Breastmilk is digested very quickly—much more quickly than infant formula and table foods—so even if a baby vomits after a feeding, they will have retained some vital nutrients and received some hydration. (For a personal example, when my daughter came down with a stomach bug when she was 15 months old, I was relieved to realize after a few nursing sessions that everytime I breastfed her, she would keep the breastmilk down. Everything else she ate, she vomited back up. Although I had started trying to wean her in the weeks before this by cutting one or two feedings per day, I was so glad that she had stubbornly continued to ask to nurse, and was therefore able to be provided hydration and nutrients while she was sick!)

A mother should always consult her baby's doctor about any illness her baby may have. She should not, however, discontinue breastfeeding while sick unless advised to by a physician. In most cases breastmilk is the BEST feeding option for a sick baby and/or sick mother.

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