

Breastfeeding Myths

By Ofelia Aragon

Every culture has its own myth surrounding breastfeeding. These myths are damaging because they do not permit for mother and child to have a successful breastfeeding experience. We do not know where all these myths come from but it is important to address them so that we can move beyond them and open the doors to this beautiful experience. Both mother and child benefit from this. So to begin what are these myths?

THE COLOSTRUM OR “FIRST MILK” IS DIRTY

According to this myth women should not feed their baby the first milk (also known as the colostrums). The myth states that the milk is too dirty and will be unhealthy for the baby. In fact, when I had my first baby, my mother gave me this same advice. She warned me against breastfeeding my infant this milk saying it was too dirty. This myth is actually not unique to the Latino culture. This myth is prevalent in parts of Africa and Asia. In parts of Japan and Hong Kong the first few days of birth the baby is given sugared water and teas. In the Latino culture the colostrums is looked upon as pus and is thrown out.

The Reality:

In reality the colostrums is one of the best things that you can give your baby. The sooner you begin to breastfeed your baby the more nutritional benefit your baby will acquire from it. Breastfeeding is important to your baby's health, including the colostrums.

The colostrums is produced during the mother's pregnancy. It continues until the first few days of lactation. Most importantly, the colostrums is low in fat and high in carbohydrates, protein and antibodies, according to La Leche League. La Leche League continues to write that, the colostrum is easily digestible; it has a laxative effect on the baby which in turn helps the infant pass his/hers early stool. When the baby passes his early stools it helps him/her excrete any excess bilirubin which helps prevent Jaundice.

The colostrums also has many other benefits that helps protect your baby against disease by aiding in the immune system development with its high level of white cells. It is beneficial to the gastrointestinal tract. In addition, the colostrum has a cathartic effect on the baby. For these reasons La Leche League states, and I agree, that the colostrum is the perfect food for your baby!

I DON'T PRODUCE ENOUGH MILK

Many women complain that they do not produce sufficient milk. This myth of insufficient milk production comes in many forms.

The Reality:

All of these in fact are myths that prevent mother and baby from enjoying this experience. Here is the truth on milk production.

It is important that the mother breastfeed their baby as soon as possible and as often as the baby desires. When the baby latches on sucks two hormones known as oxytocin and prolactin are released. Both of these are released by the pituitary gland and both are important to breastfeeding. Prolactin is important because it helps in the production of the milk. Therefore the more a mother breastfeeds, then the more the baby latches on and sucks, and the more prolactin is released. This of course increases milk production. Oxytocin is a hormone that helps squeeze the milk out. Thus the more the baby nurses, then more oxytocin is produced and the better result and success the mother and baby will have with breastfeeding.

According to La Leche League, even malnourished women make enough breast milk. It is never an issue of whether there is enough breast milk or not. When women are able to produce breast milk their bodies will naturally produce enough to meet their babies need.

Myth 3: QUANTITY NOT QUALITY: FORMULA VS. BREAST MILK

Many women believe that it is not a matter of what kind of milk a baby drinks but rather a matter of how much milk a baby is drinking. Strategic marketing and simple old time ideas lead women to believe that baby formula is just as nutritionally beneficial as the mother's milk.

Reality:

Although we have seen that it is important to feed a baby as often as s/he desires we must also have to take into account the quality. Quantity is important but we cannot discount quality.

Dr. Michael Young of the D.C. General Hospital describes formula as an "inferior substitute for breast milk." In fact there are health issues to be concerned about when comparing the two. Dr. Young tells us that "formula does not contain substances that will fight colds, ear infections, diarrhea, (and) pneumonia." The benefits of breast milk over formula are many. Breast milk helps improve brain function, protects the baby from diabetes and cancer. It has even been shown that babies that breastfeed have a lesser incidence of SIDS, Sudden Infant Death Syndrome.

Breastfeeding also benefits the mother. It helps the mother burn calories, protects her against cancer and is more economically sound. (Dr. Young).

For more information on the benefits of breast milk please read "The Benefits of Breastfeeding" by Ofelia Aragon

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