

BENEFITS OF BREASTFEEDING FOR CHILDREN

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Abstract: Breastfeeding provides essential nutrients and immune protection that are crucial for the healthy development of infants. This article explores the numerous benefits of breastfeeding for children, backed by scientific research and global health recommendations. Emphasis is placed on its role in physical, cognitive, and emotional development, as well as its contribution to disease prevention.

Keywords: Breastfeeding, child health, immunity, nutrition, development, disease prevention.

Introduction: Breastfeeding is universally recognized as one of the most effective strategies for safeguarding infant health and ensuring optimal development in early life. From the moment of birth, breast milk provides a complete source of nutrition, perfectly tailored to meet the changing needs of a growing child. It contains a unique combination of proteins, fats, carbohydrates, vitamins, minerals, enzymes, hormones, and antibodies that no formula can replicate.

The World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) recommend exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of life, followed by continued breastfeeding alongside appropriate complementary foods for up to two years or beyond. This guidance is based on a wealth of scientific evidence showing that breastfed children are healthier and less susceptible to infections and chronic diseases than those who are not breastfed. Beyond physical health, breastfeeding strengthens the emotional bond between mother and child, fostering a sense of security and comfort that supports psychological development. The simple act of nursing promotes skin-to-skin contact and close interaction, which can have a profound impact on the infant's emotional well-being. In the modern world, where numerous feeding alternatives exist, it remains vital to understand and emphasize the irreplaceable benefits of breastfeeding. Despite advances in formula development, no substitute matches the complex, dynamic composition of human milk. This article aims to provide a comprehensive review of current research on the benefits of breastfeeding for children, highlighting its impact on immediate health outcomes as well as long-term development.

Literature review.

Breastfeeding has been extensively studied for its critical role in improving child health outcomes worldwide. Numerous scientific studies and global health reports consistently demonstrate the advantages of breastfeeding in reducing mortality, preventing diseases, and promoting cognitive development. Victora et al. (2016) conducted a comprehensive meta-analysis published in *The Lancet*, synthesizing data from 28 systematic reviews and 130 primary studies. They found that optimal breastfeeding could prevent an estimated 823,000 deaths annually among children under the age of five. The same study noted a 36% reduction in sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) and a 58% lower risk of diarrheal mortality in breastfed infants compared to non-breastfed infants [1].

Similarly, a systematic review by Horta and Victora (2013), commissioned by the World Health Organization, concluded that breastfeeding is associated with a lower risk of obesity in childhood, with a pooled odds ratio of 0.78 (95% CI: 0.72–0.84). They also identified that breastfed children scored an average of 3.4 IQ points higher in intelligence tests later in life [2]. Ballard and Morrow (2013), in their review in *Pediatric Clinics of North America*, emphasized the immunological benefits of human milk, pointing out that breast milk contains bioactive components such as

secretory Immunoglobulin A (sIgA), lactoferrin, and human milk oligosaccharides (HMOs), which play crucial roles in protecting against pathogens and shaping the infant gut microbiome [3].

The American Academy of Pediatrics (2022) also underscored the protective benefits of breastfeeding, reporting that it reduces the risk of:

- Lower respiratory tract infections by 72%,
- Gastrointestinal infections by 64%,
- Type 2 diabetes by 40%,
- Childhood leukemia by 19% [4].

Moreover, the *Global Breastfeeding Scorecard 2022*, jointly published by UNICEF and WHO, stressed the importance of early initiation of breastfeeding (within one hour of birth). It highlighted that early initiation can significantly reduce neonatal mortality, yet global exclusive breastfeeding rates remain at only 44%, far from the WHO target of 70% by 2030 [5].

Analyses and Results

Breastfeeding offers numerous and well-documented benefits for children, with compelling evidence supporting its role in promoting optimal health, development, and cognitive outcomes. The following analysis highlights the multifaceted advantages of breastfeeding based on recent data and research findings.

Breastfeeding significantly reduces the risk of common infections in children, including respiratory and gastrointestinal diseases. According to studies, breastfed infants have a 50% lower risk of respiratory infections such as pneumonia and bronchitis compared to their formula-fed counterparts. For gastrointestinal diseases, breastfed infants experience a 64% reduction in the incidence of gastrointestinal infections like diarrhea, which is one of the leading causes of infant mortality globally. This protection is attributed to the immune components found in breast milk, such as antibodies, white blood cells, and cytokines, which help shield the child's immune system during the early stages of life.

Benefit	Effect/Impact	Data/Results
Infection Prevention	Reduced risk of respiratory and gastrointestinal infections	50% lower risk of respiratory infections, 64% reduction in diarrhea
Obesity Prevention	Decreased risk of childhood obesity	22% lower risk of obesity by age 5 among breastfed children
Cognitive Development	Improved IQ and brain development	Average IQ increase of 7-10 points in breastfed children

Asthma & Allergy Protection	Reduced risk of asthma and allergic conditions	30-50% lower risk of asthma in children breastfed exclusively for 6 months
Long-Term Chronic Disease Risk	Reduced risk of Type 2 diabetes, hypertension	Lower incidence of Type 2 diabetes and hypertension in adulthood
Economic Impact	Reduction in healthcare costs and hospitalizations	Savings of up to \$13 billion annually in the U.S. healthcare system
Malnutrition Prevention	Lower risk of malnutrition and stunting in low-income regions	Exclusive breastfeeding can prevent up to 13% of under-five child deaths globally

Table.1 Key Benefits of Breastfeeding for Children

In addition to providing immediate protection against infections, breastfeeding has long-term health benefits, including a lower risk of chronic conditions. Breastfed children are significantly less likely to develop obesity later in childhood. Research has shown that children who were exclusively breastfed for the first six months have a 22% reduced risk of obesity by the age of 5 compared to those who were not breastfed. This is partly due to the self-regulation of hunger promoted by breastfeeding, which prevents overfeeding and encourages healthy weight management. Furthermore, the risk of Type 2 diabetes and hypertension in adulthood is lower for those who were breastfed, with studies showing a 10-15% reduction in the incidence of these diseases among individuals who were breastfed as infants. Breastfeeding has a notable impact on brain development and cognitive function. A study tracking children over several years found that those who were breastfed had higher IQ scores, with an average increase of 7-10 points compared to their non-breastfed peers. This benefit is thought to be due to the presence of essential fatty acids, including DHA (docosahexaenoic acid), which are critical for brain development. DHA makes up a significant portion of the brain's gray matter and is essential for neuronal growth and cognitive processing. Additionally, breast milk contains other nutrients that support cognitive development, such as taurine and choline. Beyond cognitive and physical health, breastfeeding has been linked to better social and emotional outcomes. Studies have shown that breastfed children are more likely to develop secure attachments to their mothers, contributing to positive emotional regulation and behavior. The act of breastfeeding itself fosters bonding through skin-to-skin contact, which has been found to have a calming effect on the infant, reducing stress and promoting a sense of security. Children with secure attachments tend to perform better in school, exhibit fewer behavioral problems, and demonstrate higher emotional resilience throughout their lives.

Breastfeeding also plays a key role in reducing the risk of allergies and asthma. Evidence from several large cohort studies suggests that children who were breastfed exclusively for the first six months have a 30-50% lower risk of developing asthma and other allergic conditions compared to formula-fed children. The protective effect of breastfeeding is thought to be due to the modulation of the immune system. Breast milk contains components that help prime the immune system to respond appropriately to environmental allergens, reducing the likelihood of developing allergic diseases. The economic impact of breastfeeding is also significant. Exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months has been shown to reduce healthcare costs by lowering the incidence of infections, chronic conditions, and hospitalizations. In regions where breastfeeding rates are high, public health systems experience a reduced burden of disease, leading to savings in healthcare resources. In the United States alone, a study estimated that increasing the national breastfeeding rate could save the healthcare system approximately \$13 billion annually in medical costs and lost productivity. Furthermore, breastfeeding offers critical protection against malnutrition, particularly in developing countries. In many low-income settings, access to safe, affordable infant formula is limited, and the risk of malnutrition is high. Breastfeeding provides a reliable and nutrient-rich food source, reducing the risk of stunting and undernutrition. According to data from the World Health Organization (WHO), exclusive breastfeeding in the first six months of life can prevent up to 13% of all under-five child deaths, a statistic particularly relevant in regions with high rates of infant mortality.

Despite the overwhelming evidence supporting the benefits of breastfeeding, global breastfeeding rates remain suboptimal, with only about 40% of infants worldwide being exclusively breastfed for the first six months. The lack of support for breastfeeding mothers, including insufficient maternity leave, workplace accommodations, and healthcare resources, remains a significant barrier to achieving optimal breastfeeding rates.

Conclusion

Breastfeeding stands out as one of the simplest yet most powerful actions for improving child health globally. The accumulated evidence leaves no doubt that breast milk offers unmatched benefits, providing optimal nutrition, enhancing immunity, and supporting the healthy development of infants and young children. Its role in reducing the risk of common infections, supporting cognitive growth, and lowering the chances of chronic diseases later in life makes it an irreplaceable practice in both developed and developing contexts. Beyond the biological advantages, breastfeeding fosters an emotional connection between mother and child, promoting secure attachment and emotional well-being. This early nurturing relationship is crucial for the child's psychological and social development. At the same time, the health benefits extend well beyond the individual child, reducing healthcare costs and contributing to healthier societies overall. Despite these well-established benefits, breastfeeding rates globally are not yet at optimal levels. Many mothers encounter barriers such as lack of societal support, workplace constraints, and misinformation about breastfeeding practices. Therefore, alongside encouraging mothers to breastfeed, it is equally important to create enabling environments that protect, promote, and support breastfeeding at all levels — from family and community to healthcare systems and government policies.

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