



The Breastfeeding Challenge: Why should you face it?

(An article for parents)

Debbie Burger (B.OT)

“Breastfeeding is best” has become a cliché to many of us, but the truth this statement contains warrants me writing about it. The arrival of an unexpected preterm baby comes with a lot of challenges. Breastfeeding is only one of them, but oh, such an important one! For me personally, breastfeeding was surely the most difficult hiccup I had to face when I gave birth to my two preterm babies. So why did I choose to continue to persevere with breastfeeding, and why should you consider breastfeeding even if it can be challenging? In this article the importance of breastfeeding a preterm baby will be discussed.

What makes breastfeeding so unique and the number one choice of nutrition for babies? Why is it often said that ‘Breast milk is the best food for your baby?’¹ Research over many years has clearly proven the various benefits of breastfeeding². Firstly, breast milk is your baby’s natural food², and what makes it so unique is that it changes in content according to your baby’s specific needs at any given time^{1,3}. The female breast does not only produce different types of milk but it is also able to adjust the amount⁴. These changes occur from feed to feed, day to day and even within a single feed³. Breast milk is superior to any formula milk⁴, as it does not have a static composition like formula milk but adjusts to meet the needs of your baby⁴.

*

Why should breast milk ideally be the milk of choice for the preterm infant? Medically, a preterm baby falls in a high-risk category, because she* is physiologically not as mature as a full-term baby³. Breastfeeding a premature baby is important to help improve her development outside the womb³, and therefore the mother’s breasts produce milk for her that is different from the milk produced for a full-term baby⁴.

*The preterm baby will be referred to as “she” for the sake of simplicity.



Preterm milk is easy to digest and does not stress the baby's body unnecessarily⁴. It is fully absorbed by the preemie's immature digestive and excretory systems, thus causing less colic, diarrhoea and constipation³.

Breast milk is a natural bodily fluid³, and it meets your baby's nutritional needs perfectly to sustain her as she grows⁵: from vitamins, minerals, carbohydrates, unique proteins, to healthy fats^{1,3,5}, in adequate quantities and in the right ratio⁶. It improves brain and eye development^{1,3,5}, and it is also known that a small premature infant who receives breast milk shows better psychomotor development and has fewer subsequent eye problems than a baby fed with formula milk⁴.

A preterm baby particularly benefits from the protective factors present in breast milk⁴, as they have a low resistance against infection³. These immune factors in breast milk protect the preemie against infections such as viral, respiratory tract, middle ear and intestinal infections amongst others³. Another amazing fact, is that a mom can breastfeed while she is ill, since the antibodies (soldiers) and not the virus are transferred to the baby^{1,3}.

Breast milk may even reduce the possibility of most food allergies³, and it lowers the risk of allergies such as eczema and asthma³. Exclusive breastfeeding until at least six months even helps prevent allergies later on in life⁵.

Breastfeeding helps to maintain appropriate thermo-regulation³ by the closeness of the process. In addition, the security of skin-to-skin and eye contact stimulates a baby's sense of taste and smell, while at the same time enhances bonding between mother and child³. This has a beneficial effect on the development of the baby's personality⁶.

The list goes on... A breastfed baby has fewer incidents of nappy rash and thrush³. The physical action of breastfeeding promotes proper mouth, jaw and teeth development³, and she has better coordinated sucking and swallowing skills than a bottle-fed baby³. A breastfed baby consumes fewer calories during feeding than a bottlefed baby, but this is

not a problem, as the breastfed baby maintains higher oxygen saturation during feeding, which results in less energy expenditure during feeding³.

Despite all these numerous advantages, breast milk does not always cover all the nutritional needs of a very tiny premature infant⁴, and expressed breast milk is often fortified/enriched with proteins, carbohydrates and salts (especially calcium)^{3,4}. Additionally, vitamins and iron are given in the form of drops⁴. These fortifiers are only added for a certain period, usually determined by the Paediatrician.

The preterm baby surely benefits from breast milk, but are there many advantages for moms who breastfeed, which would make the challenges of it less severe and more manageable. As soon as you can give your child your breast you are giving her a very important feeling of closeness and security⁴. It is a very special time which should be treasured. It promotes bonding, provides emotional satisfaction and a feeling of well-being³. Not least it gives you the opportunity to do something for your child after birth that no-one else can do – even if you have to express your milk⁴.

Then there are the medical benefits for the mother: the release of oxytocin when breastfeeding (or pumping), causes the mom's uterus to contract, which minimises bleeding and decreases infection risk³. Milk production also burns calories, which means a mom can get her pre-pregnant figure back quicker³. It has long been known that breastfeeding is associated with a lower risk of breast cancer⁴. In addition it inhibits ovulation for variable periods and therefore has a contraceptive effect⁶.

Another interesting benefit that is not always known, is that breast milk can also be used as a bath additive – it is wonderful for the skin⁴.

We have seen that breastfeeding is undoubtedly the best nutrition for babies, be it preterm or full-term, but are there any disadvantages of breastfeeding? The greatest disadvantage is that it restricts the activities of the mother since she alone can feed the baby⁶. And then, of course, breastfeeding does not always come naturally or easily⁵. Unfortunately it is not smooth sailing all of the time. It is a skill, which you and your baby need to practise to master³. You have to allow yourselves time to gain confidence and master the art of breastfeeding together³.



So when to stop breastfeeding - is there a perfect time? The current World Health Organization (WHO) recommendations state that exclusive breastfeeding for six months is optimal¹. Some people enjoy feeding for one, two or even three years, but for others, six months is difficult¹. While it's good to aim for a long period, if you don't manage six months, this is not a failure¹. As in my case, I only breastfed my babies for five and a half months, simply because of all those hiccups. So even if you don't last six months, you will have done your best¹. Even a few days of colostrum is a good start and sets your baby up well¹ and each feed with breastmilk is a bonus for your baby⁴.

Breastfeeding is not problem-free, like most things in life, but we have seen that it is worth the effort to tackle those hiccups head-on, and, even if you just manage to breastfeed for a short period of time, you and your baby would have undoubtedly still gained from it. Would I do it again? Without a doubt. What about you?

References

1. Sharkey, H. 2006. Pregnancy. London. Collins.
2. Faure, M., Richardson, A. 2007. Sleep sense. Welgemoed SA. Metz Press.
3. Lubbe, W. 2008. Prematurity – Adjusting your dream. Pretoria SA. Little Steps.
4. Wir eltern editorial department. 2002. Breastfeeding preemies. Zurich. Wir eltern publishing house.
5. Faure, M., Richardson, A. 2002. Baby sense. SA. Metz Press.
6. Meyer, B.J., Meij, H.S., Meyer, A.C. 1994. Human Physiology. Cape Town SA. Juta & Co, Ltd.