

# Breast is Best

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Breastfeeding is the natural act of a woman nourishing an infant with milk produced by her own body and expressed from her breasts. In spite of it being natural and it being something that ought to go hand in hand with childbirth, breastfeeding has become a sensational topic, salacious even, in recent years. Although the nutritional content of breast milk has been documented to be healthier, nursing mothers still experience duress. The general public's view on this matter has sparked a movement whose slogan, "Breast is best!" encourages mothers to breastfeed instead of succumbing to public pressure to bottle feed their infants. In this essay, I will discuss the nutritional benefits of breastfeeding vs. formula feeding along with the way in which current public policies are having an impact on women and their decision to nurse.

Differences between breast and formula-fed infants remain fairly minimal until months 2-12 when breastfed infants end up being leaner than formula-fed infants after their first year of life. It is at the 4-5-month demarcation when formula-fed infants show higher plasma levels of insulin, insulin-like growth factors, and certain amino acids in their blood than breastfed infants do. Higher protein intake at this point has been confirmed to be an important risk factor for obesity later in life. Unlike formula feeding, breastfeeding has been associated with lesser weight gain over the course of the infant's life. This is partially due to leptin-containing human milk, which has been found to play a role in post-natal programming of body weight and the regulation of muscle thermogenesis (Melnik, 2012), which refers to the heat produced within muscle tissue, and also due to the fact that formula-fed infants can easily be overfed because there is a relatively endless supply of formula. An infant who is breastfed is only able to consume the amount of milk that its nursing mother can produce throughout a 24-hour timespan, reducing not only his or her chances of becoming obese later in life, but also the risks of type 2 diabetes, as well as breast and ovarian cancers for the mother (Nguyen and Hawkins, 2013).

Several barriers to breastfeeding were identified in 2011 after the US Surgeon General's *Call to Action to Support Breastfeeding*, namely, the mother's need to return to work and/or school and the embarrassment experienced by the mother over breastfeeding in a public place. The former group's challenges included insufficient and/or irregular break times and a lack of private and clean facilities to express and store breast milk (Nguyen and Hawkins, 2013). The latter group of women can actually be asked to stop nursing their child, if they are in a public place where breastfeeding policies are not supported by legislation. Enacted in 2010, the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act

became the first federal legislation to support women in their decision to breastfeed.

In spite of this federal legislation being passed, discrepancies in how state and federal laws protect women continue to exist:

While 92% of states had legislation permitting women to breastfeed in any public or private location and 57% exempted breastfeeding from indecency laws, less than half of states encouraged or required employers to provide break time and accommodations, prohibited employment discrimination based on breastfeeding, or offered breastfeeding women exemption from jury duty." (Nguyen and Hawkins, 2013)

This shows the need for public awareness to be raised via campaigns advocating a woman's right to breastfeed and informing people that breast is, indeed, best for both mother and child. Although laws have been established to protect women, they remain ineffective if the public is unaware of their existence.

Research continues to support women breastfeeding. The health benefits alone trump the formula-feeding experience for both mother and child. Public policies by way of legislation have been enacted to protect breastfeeding mothers; however, federal and state laws render themselves useless if the general public is unaware of both the benefits of breastfeeding—and the fact that a criminal act is being committed when accommodations are not provided to the nursing mother. Increased public awareness is required to allow a mother to nurse comfortably and confidently in a public space.

#### Works Cited

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