



A Healthier Baby by Breastfeeding

By Janet D. Lawson, M.D., F.A.C.O.G.

***Dear Dr. Lawson:
How long should mothers nurse their babies? I thought you were supposed to stop at six months.***

--Clara H., Lexington, Texas

Dear Clara:

In the 60s and 70s, many physicians recommended weaning at six months. This was partly due to a fear that nursing longer would make weaning more difficult. We now know this is not the case. Also, there are benefits to long-term nursing.

There is no "set time" to wean a baby from the breast. Each baby is different and the mother and her baby -- not family members or friends -- should be the ones to determine when to wean.

Most babies are developmentally ready to start solid foods at about 6 months of age. Even after starting solid foods, babies continue to receive important nutrients from their mothers' milk for the first year, because breastmilk changes to meet their developmental and nutritional needs.

If you become pregnant and are still nursing a toddler, the milk you produce will change to meet the nutritional needs

of your new baby. Because of this, the older nurser may not like the taste of the new milk and may wean on his own.

Breastmilk offers immunities against disease and infection as long as breastfeeding continues. This is especially important for babies in daycare settings or for those who have school-age siblings.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that mothers breastfeed for one year or longer to give babies the optimum protection against certain health problems later in life. Babies who are breastfed for a year or more may have a lower risk for developing:

- acute appendicitis,
- certain childhood cancers, such as leukemia,
- diabetes and obesity.

Breastfeeding helps improve vision, brain growth, and jaw and facial development. Several studies have shown that breastfed babies do better in school.

By breastfeeding for a year or more, a mother may improve her own health as well, lowering her risk for breast cancer, ovarian cancer and osteoporosis. The longer you nurse, the healthier you and your baby will be.

If you are pregnant or planning to start a family, you owe it to your children to learn everything you can about the benefits of breastfeeding. Call the State WIC office at 1-800-942-3678 for breastfeeding information. If you are a new mom and need immediate help or assistance with breastfeeding, call the Texas breastfeeding helpline at 1-800-514-6667.

Dr. Lawson is the Medical Consultant for Title X, Texas Department of State Health Services.