

Practice Applications from the Surgeon General

Mothers and Children Benefit from Breastfeeding



Rear Admiral Steven K. Galson

One of our nation's founding fathers, Benjamin Franklin, once said, "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." For those of us in the business of health care, his message is an important one and one that the Office of the US Surgeon General champions: individuals who follow healthful lifestyles can help prevent the onset of disease and the subsequent financial and emotional cost of treating the disease.

As food and nutrition specialists, you are well aware that healthful eating is an important contributor to the prevention of many chronic diseases that are prevalent in the United States today, such as heart disease, obesity, diabetes, and certain forms of cancer. While we strive for solutions to these problems, foremost in our actions should be prevention.

A good place to focus prevention efforts is with our children. Nutrition professionals use multidimensional strategies that are culturally and socially appropriate to promote healthful eating. One promising strategy is to encourage new mothers to breastfeed. We know that breastfeeding is a safe, time-proven feeding method that helps infants to have a healthful start in life. So unless there are contraindications that warrant a woman to not begin or to interrupt or stop breastfeeding (see <http://www.cdc.gov/breastfeeding/disease/contraindicators.htm> for further information), women should be encouraged and given the necessary tools with which to breastfeed their infants. The American Dietetic Association (ADA) has long recognized the value of breastfeeding.

For most women, breastfeeding is biologically possible. Both babies and mothers gain many benefits from breastfeeding. Breast milk is easy to digest and contains antibodies that can protect infants from bacterial and viral infections. Also, research indicates that women who breastfeed may have lower rates of certain breast and ovarian cancers.

A common reason cited for not planning to breastfeed is that the mother will be returning to work. Women are a significant part of the work force. One out of three women will return to work within 3 months of giving birth and two out of three women will return to work within 6 months of giving birth. Many mothers will return within 6 weeks or even sooner.

Until recently, when breastfeeding mothers returned to work, they faced the challenge of maintaining an adequate milk supply. But many employers have discovered that accommodating employees who breastfeed is good business. The Office on Women's Health in the US Department of Health and Human Services notes that the health benefits to mother and baby conveyed by breastfeeding translate into reduced costs to employers due to lower health care costs, decreased absenteeism, enhanced productivity, improved employee satisfaction, and a better corporate image.

It is feasible for women to breastfeed in many work environments. Accommodating breastfeeding is not complicated, but as with other work-site issues, clarifying mutual expectations and understanding local policy will minimize concerns. The key needs are basic: time, a location in which to pump or express the breast milk, and employer-employee communication. When child care is on-site or nearby and schedules are supportive, breastfeeding can continue seamlessly.

Both babies and mothers gain many benefits from breastfeeding. As we are seeing across our country, more employers are providing support for nursing mothers. I appreciate the American Dietetic Association's position that food and nutrition professionals have an essential role in promoting and supporting breastfeeding. I urge American Dietetic Association members to reaffirm this role as they join in creating and supporting pathways for working mothers to continue breastfeeding.

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For additional information:

US Department of Health and Human Services. Breastfeeding: Best for Baby—Best for Mom
<http://www.womenshealth.gov/breastfeeding/index.cfm>

American Academy of Pediatrics, Breastfeeding and the Use of Human Milk
<http://aappolicy.aappublications.org/cgi/content/full/pediatrics;100/6/1035>

American Dietetic Association, Promoting and Supporting Breastfeeding
<http://www.eatright.org/ada/files/servevp.pdf>