



The Importance of Breastfeeding for Mothers and Parents

Much of the discussion about the importance of breastfeeding focuses on the baby. What about the other partner in the breastfeeding relationship? Your baby's body expects to receive your milk and be nurtured at your breast. And your body expects to continue lactating for months or years. Breastfeeding is important for you, too.

Recovering from your pregnancy and the birth

The hormone oxytocin, released every time you breastfeed, helps your uterus return to its normal size quickly. Oxytocin causes the uterus to contract. These contractions are called "afterpains." You may not feel them with a first pregnancy. With future pregnancies, however, they can be as strong as labour contractions for a day or two. After that, contractions continue, but are usually not felt. These contractions narrow the blood vessels in your uterus. This prevents you from losing too much blood.

Oxytocin also affects your mood. It produces a strong sense of love and attachment. This helps you bond with your baby. The hormone prolactin is also released when breastfeeding. It creates a peaceful and nurturing sensation in your body. Nursing parents often feel relaxed while feeding their babies.

Not breastfeeding

Not breastfeeding can have negative health effects on maternal rates of:

- breast, ovarian and endometrial cancer.
- osteoporosis.
- type 2 Diabetes.
- Alzheimer's Disease.
- depression.
- cardiovascular disease which can lead to heart attack and stroke.

Breast, ovarian and endometrial cancers

Not breastfeeding increases your chance of developing breast, ovarian and endometrial cancer. It is believed that because exclusive breastfeeding suppresses a woman's menstrual cycle, it reduces her lifetime exposure to estrogen. And estrogen "feeds" these cancers. Research shows that the longer a mother breastfeeds, as in the total number of months she spends breastfeeding, the lower her risk for these cancers.

Osteoporosis

While you are breastfeeding, your body will draw calcium from your bones. The calcium is transported to your milk to supply some of the calcium required by your baby. (Much of the calcium your baby needs comes from a decrease in the calcium excreted into your urine. Very little comes from calcium supplements.) This leads to a temporary loss of calcium in your bones while you are breastfeeding. However, research indicates that by 6 to 12 months after weaning, bone mineral density has returned to pre-pregnancy levels. Research was conducted on women 16 to 20 years after the birth of the last child. Women who had breastfed for 33 months or more over a lifetime had significantly better bone strength in the hip and tibia than those who had breastfed a shorter length of time. This is believed to be due to the hormonal changes that occur while lactating.

Type 2 Diabetes

Studies have shown that breastfeeding can protect women from developing type 2 diabetes. This is particularly true for women who have had gestational diabetes during pregnancy. The longer a woman's duration of breastfeeding over her lifetime, the greater her protection from developing type 2 diabetes. Little or no breastfeeding increases your risk of developing type 2 diabetes.

Alzheimer's Disease

Impaired cognitive health after age 50 is a strong predictor of Alzheimer's disease. A [study](#) published in 2021 found that women over 50 who had breastfed showed superior cognitive performance than those who had not. They also found that the longer women breastfed, the better their cognitive performance. Women who breastfed the longest had the highest cognitive test scores. A [2013 study](#) found similar results. The longer women breastfed, the lower their risk of developing Alzheimer's Disease. Not breastfeeding increases your risk of having Alzheimer's Disease.

Depression

Nursing has been found to protect parents' mental health. Exclusive breastfeeding is associated with a reduced risk of postpartum depression. Nursing has been shown to lower stress and increase sleep in breastfeeding parents. This decreases the risk of depressive symptoms.

Cardiovascular Disease

More evidence for the importance of breastfeeding comes from the massive [Women's Health Initiative](#) trial in the United States. This study involved nearly 140,000 women, ages 50-79 at the time of the study. Researchers found that women who had breastfed were less likely, after menopause, to have developed high blood pressure, diabetes,

high cholesterol and cardiovascular disease. (Cardiovascular disease is the leading cause of death in Canadian women.)

Results from this study:

- Women who had breastfed for one to six months had less diabetes, less high blood pressure and less high cholesterol. These are all known risk factors for heart disease.
- Those who breastfed for seven months or more were significantly less likely to have developed cardiovascular disease compared to women who had never breastfed.
- Women who breastfed for a lifetime total of at least 12 months were 10 per cent less likely to have had a heart attack or stroke, or to have developed heart disease when they were older.
- The finding held even after researchers took age, income, body mass index, diet, physical activity, family history of heart disease and other factors into account.

One theory is that breastfeeding lowers the risk of cardiovascular disease by mobilizing fat stores. When women don't breastfeed, or express their milk, the body fat stored up during pregnancy isn't used as nature intended it to be (to support lactation). However, this study found that the lower rates of cardiovascular disease were still present after BMI was accounted for; heavier women still had lower rates of disease. This indicates that lactation does more than simply reduce a woman's fat stores. It is possible that the hormones of lactation, such as oxytocin, may have an effect on cardiovascular profiles.

"Breastfeeding has an important role in the way women's bodies recover from pregnancy. I think what we're seeing is that when this process is interrupted by women feeding their babies things other than human milk, women are more likely to have a number of health problems." *Dr Eleanor Bimla Schwarz, of the University of Pittsburgh*

There are many reasons why you may choose to breastfeed your baby. Knowing that breastfeeding can help you recover from pregnancy and protect you from future health problems is just one more reason.

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