

## What's In It FOR YOU?

Six ways  
breastfeeding  
benefits  
new moms

**Y**ou know how important breast milk is for your baby. In fact, because of nursing's myriad benefits, the American Public Health Association has just joined the World Health Organization, the American Academy of Pediatrics, and UNICEF in recommending that babies be breastfed exclusively for six months and then for one to two years thereafter. But did you know that your baby isn't the only one who will receive the terrific benefits breastfeeding provides? Producing breast milk will do your body good, too. Here's how.

### IT LOWERS YOUR RISK OF CANCER.

Numerous studies have shown that breastfeeding protects women from breast, uterine, and ovarian cancer. If you nurse for a total of 24 months (for example, 12 months each for two children), you'll lower your risk by 25 percent. "The longer a woman breastfeeds, the more she is protected," says Jeannette Crenshaw, M.S.N., a clinical education specialist at Texas Health Resources' The Center for Learning, and a member of the U.S. Breastfeeding Committee, which seeks to improve national health by supporting breastfeeding. Researchers don't know for sure why nursing lowers cancer risk, but most believe that the prolonged decrease in estrogen that happens during breastfeeding in turn decreases the incidence of breast cancer, says Judy Hopkinson, M.D., an associate professor of pediatrics at Children's Nutrition Research Center in Houston.



BY ● KYLA STEINKRAUS

These natural hormone fluctuations may decrease the risk of other illnesses, too. A 2007 Swedish study reported that women who breastfed for 13 months or more had reduced incidence of rheumatoid arthritis, while the birth control pill and hormone replacement therapy did not show significant effects.

### IT HELPS PREVENT DEPRESSION.

Fifty to 80 percent of moms experience some form of the postpartum blues, but in as many as 20 percent of women, the feelings of stress, exhaustion, and loneliness turn into true depression. According to recent research published in *Nutrition Review*, breastfeeding combats depression through the release of prolactin, a hormone that stimulates feelings of calm and relaxation. One study conducted by the University of Tennessee College of Nursing in Knoxville found that women who were nursing were



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significantly less likely to suffer from depression or experience feelings of anxiety and anger than those who were bottle-feeding.

**IT KEEPS YOUR PERIOD AWAY.** OK, it's not as powerful a reason as lowering your cancer risk, but going period-free for several more months will sound pretty great when you already have your hands full. Who has time for bloating and cramps when all you want is three consecutive hours of sleep? The average time span before the menstrual period returns is six months, says Rubina Mason, R.N., an international board-certified lactation consultant and a member of the Lansinoh Breastfeeding Advisory Board. But remember, an average is just that. Your period could return as early as six weeks, or you could get lucky like San Diego mom Christine Vanek, who didn't have a single period during the 12 months she breastfed her daughter.

**IT ACTS AS NATURAL BIRTH CONTROL.** Moms who breastfeed exclusively have about a 2 percent chance of pregnancy during the first six months postpartum, Mason says. This method is only effective if your periods have not returned, the baby is less than 6 months old, and you are breastfeeding around the clock, which means no occasional bottles of formula. If you're serious about not getting pregnant, it's best to use another form of birth control to make sure you don't end up in that 2 percent. Just ask Erica Hippler of Buchanan, MI, who was quite surprised to find out she was already pregnant again when she went back to work after her 12-week maternity leave.

**IT TRIMS YOUR WAIST.** Nursing burns up to 500 calories a day. Some studies show conflicting results, but most women will lose weight while they breastfeed—if they don't take in too many excess calories, Hopkinson says. You should eat about 2,500 calories to maintain your weight, and you can lower your intake by 300 to 500 calories to safely lose about four pounds a month. Never go lower than 1,800 calories a day, warns Hopkinson, or you could deplete your milk supply.



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**IT PROTECTS YOUR BONES.** Although you may experience some decrease in bone density during early nursing, this is most likely just the way the body supplies large amounts of calcium in the milk right after birth, Hopkinson suggests. "After menses resumes and the baby is weaned, maternal bone density increases to a point higher than it was before breastfeeding," she says. Some studies suggest that breastfeeding offers a protective factor against osteoporosis. One study revealed that teenage mothers who breastfed had higher bone density two years later than teenage mothers who did not breastfeed.

**AND ONE MORE BONUS:** "I feel so lucky I could provide this wonderful gift to my daughter," says Vanek of breastfeeding. But nursing is a gift you give to yourself, too. And it's a gift that truly keeps on giving, for both you and your baby. 

Kyla Steinkraus gave the gift of breastfeeding to herself and her now two-year-old son. She lives with her family in Hinsdale, IL.

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