

## LESS FORMULA, MORE OXYTOCIN –by Koinonea House

In the 1960s, it became very popular to get up in the middle of the night and stumble around with one eye open to heat up sterilized bottles of formula for infants. Doctors did not encourage women to breastfeed. In fact, one woman related to us that in 1966 she told her doctor that she planned to breastfeed her new baby, and the doctor responded with an incredulous, "Why would you want to do that?" The medical community has since begun to appreciate the many benefits of breast milk for babies, and for the past few decades have again encouraged women to feed their infants the real stuff for as long as reasonably possible. Yet, hospitals regularly give new mothers formula, freely provided by the formula companies to increase brand name recognition, often resulting in mothers' relying at least partially on bottles from the get-go. In New York City these days, to breastfeed or not to breastfeed is no longer the question. The answer, solidly, is "Lock up the formula!" Mayor Michael Bloomberg has sought to stop the hospital practice of automatically giving mothers formula for their newborns. The city is officially pushing breastfeeding, and 27 of 40 hospitals have agreed to the new policy. Formula has not been outlawed, but getting a nurse to provide a new mother formula in a NYC hospital now requires keys, paperwork, signatures - not to mention a lecture on the benefits of breastfeeding. Some people consider the pressure to breastfeed and the locking away of formula to be somewhat extreme. As *Chicago Tribune* writer Steve Chapman suggested, "It may be easier to get marijuana." The rest of the country may not be focusing as energetically on mother's milk as NYC, but education and encouragement have been working. According to the Centers for Disease Control, 76.9 percent of women in 2009 breastfed for awhile after giving birth. After three months, 36 percent of mothers were still exclusively breastfeeding (no formula or other supplements), and 16.3 percent were pushing on with breastmilk only at 6 months, up from 11 percent in 2004. Breastfeeding has once again become the medically-supported thing to do. It is recognized that breastfed babies tend to be less prone to illness and are, in general, healthier and happier than their bottle-fed peers. There is far more to breastfeeding, however, than merely baby nutrition, and many people to this day do not appreciate the multitude of wonderful built-in

benefits of old fashioned nursing. The purpose of this article is not simply to promote breastfeeding. Some women who would love to breastfeed find they cannot for one reason or another, and our purpose is not to frustrate those mothers. Our purpose here – and we hope we can communicate the amazement and wonder implicit in these facts – is to raise appreciation for the precious care God took in His plan for bringing new life into the world. Even beyond the question of infant food, breastfeeding provides a blanket of protection that smooths the way for both new baby and mommy. A multitude of mercies can be found in the simple act of suckling a child, and they demonstrate the goodness and wisdom of our great God.

**The Placenta:** Many women can testify to the aggravation and pain of having nurses pressing on their stomachs or tugging on the umbilical cord to get the placenta to come out after the baby is born. God made a much better way. When the mother begins to nurse after the baby's birth, the hormone oxytocin is released by the pituitary gland, sending a message to the uterus to release the placenta and to continue the contractions necessary to deliver it. It may take some time, but without any stomach mashing or cord tugging, without leaving pieces behind, the placenta will generally come out on its own after a few more pushes by the new mom.

**The Uterus:** The release of oxytocin also naturally makes the uterus squeeze back into place. This is important, because the uterus has been supplying blood to the placenta, and it needs to close off those open blood vessels. (Vigorously rubbing the uterus can also help shrink it to prevent the mother from losing too much blood.) Breastfeeding can initially be painful, especially with a woman's third or fourth (etc) child, because her uterus is tightening back up during the days after birth. It's good, though. It also helps get rid of that post-pregnancy belly.

**Nutrients:** As long as the mother is eating decently, her milk is the healthiest for a new baby. Formulas are "formulas" – they are mixed together with all the ingredients formula chemists know how to put in them. But, mother's milk is alive. It contains living cells and antibodies that provide the most easily assimilated nutrition for a baby's little system, as well as a multitude of ingredients that formula-makers just don't know how to duplicate. Breastmilk is easiest for the

baby to digest, and babies who nurse have fewer tummy aches (unless Mom gorges on spicy Thai food one night). Fewer tummy aches means a happier baby, which also means happier parents.

**Antibodies:** Babies receive their first natural disease-fighting resources from their moms' milk, especially during the first few weeks after birth. A study published in the journal *Pediatrics* in April, 2010 concluded that nearly 900 babies and billions of dollars in medical costs would be saved every year if new mothers in the US simply breast-fed for the first six months. The antibodies in breast milk do more than just pass on immunity to disease. Mother's milk has long been used to disinfect the outside of babies' bodies too. It may sound odd to some, but a squirt of breast milk on a scratch or mosquito bite, or even in the eye of child with pink eye, is a time-proven aid in the healing process.

**Bonding:** After birth, oxytocin continues to be released during nursing. It's a multi-purpose hormone that has also been called the "hormone of love" because it encourages emotional bonding between people when it is released. Oxytocin helps momma to bond to her child. Beyond oxytocin, though, nursing provides for plenty of mother-baby time. Anybody can bottle feed a baby, but only momma can nurse, and momma can't nurse while she's running around being busy. She has to sit and rock and hold that baby and look into the baby's eyes. Not only does that help a mother to get to know this new human in her life, but it helps the baby to bond to his mommy too. Babies can't see very well; they can't focus on everything at all distances. But, the distance from the breast to a mother's face is perfect for allowing a baby's eyes to focus. Nursing forces mommy and baby to spend one-on-one time with each other, and that is essential for getting to know one another.

**Weight Loss:** Nursing is God's weight loss plan for new mothers, especially for mothers who nurse for more than six months. All the weight packed on during pregnancy is part of God's plan to make sure mom can easily feed her new baby in the big wide world. As the baby grows and needs more food, he dips into those fat reserves that his mother built up while she was pregnant. After enough months go by, that fat can start peeling off - unless Mom enjoys her daily hot fudge sundaes too much. Mothers are not the only beneficiaries in

this regard. Babies who breastfeed tend to be less likely to be obese as children. This may be because a nursing mother passes on the hormone leptin to her infant, which helps regulate appetite. Babies who breast feed are also not encouraged to finish a bottle, and so get used to eating only as much as they need. Experts also think that the lower protein content of breast milk actually helps program an infant's body in a way that makes obesity later on less likely.

**It's Free:** Formula is expensive. Breast milk, on the other hand, is free and readily available. It is sterile and is always stored at the perfect temperature. It is also much easier than formula to provide in the middle of the night.

**Birth Control:** While not fool-proof, exclusive breastfeeding can postpone a woman's first post-birth menstrual period for many months.

**Breast Cancer Prevention:** Fewer menstrual cycles means that the nursing mother has fewer showers of estrogen washing her body, and therefore has a lower chance for breast cancer. Breastfeeding also physically changes the cells in the breast in a way that actually helps them resist the mutations that can cause cancer. The link between breastfeeding and a decreased risk for breast cancer is quite strong, and is demonstrated in a 517-page report called "Food, Nutrition, Physical Activity, and the Prevention of Cancer: a Global Perspective" published by the American Institute for Cancer Research - the result of five years of study by nine independent teams of scientists.

**Safer Babies:** Studies have shown that mothers who nurse are less likely to abuse their children. There are probably several reasons for this. First, babies who nurse tend to experience less stomach discomfort and therefore cry uncontrollably less often. Mothers who bond closely with their children are less likely to be easily frustrated by them, and mothers who breastfeed are also mothers who get more sleep than those who have to get up in the middle of the night for feedings. Are mothers who bottle feed their babies bad? Of course not. Some women persistently struggle to breastfeed and yet never get the hang of it. Some women just don't produce enough milk to feed their babies. In Third World countries, women who have this

problem often have to rely on other nursing mothers to help them. Some women find that their babies are still hungry after breastfeeding and need to drink formula to find contentment. Some babies like the bottle better because they can drink more food faster. In the end, some mothers have to work to survive, and nursing just doesn't fit in very well. There are still many benefits to nursing, and even if new moms can nurse once a day, it is good both for them and the baby.

We human beings can feel as though God has just dumped us on this earth with no apparent purpose or direction. Yet, from the very beginning of our lives, He developed a plan to give us the comfort, protection, and nourishment we need through somebody designed to love us and care for us. Not only does breastfeeding help the newborn baby, it helps the mother as well. Everything God does has purpose (often a multitude of purposes); sometimes, like the doctors in the 1960s, we just need to find out what those purposes are.