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August is Breastfeeding Awareness Month. This month we walk you through the benefits of breastfeeding, how to get a smooth start, and how to deal with problems that may occur.

Babies who are exclusively breastfed for at least six months are less likely to develop ear infections, respiratory illnesses, and diarrhea. Breastfeeding your baby that is too young for immunizations can also help protect them from measles, mumps, colds, and the flu.

Other benefits of breastfeeding include a strong mother-child bond and decreased childhood obesity. Maternal benefits include delaying the return of menstrual periods and helping to space pregnancies.

It also decreases the breastfeeding mother's risk of breast and ovarian cancers.

According to U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office on Women's Health, breastfeeding benefits for families include saving the family budget hundreds of dollars, saving on health care costs, contributing to a more productive workforce, and creating a healthier society.

You can prepare to get a smooth start to breastfeeding before your baby is even born. Talk to friends or read about breastfeeding during your pregnancy. Get good prenatal care to help you carry your baby to term (babies in the NICU have more trouble breastfeeding). Let your health care provider know if you have any previous breast surgery or injury. If your nipples appear flat or inverted, it may affect how your baby latches on.

The best time to start nursing is in the first one to two hours after delivery when the baby is alert and ready to suck. Breastfeeding positions include the cradle hold, transitional hold, football hold, and side-lying positions. Keeping the baby in the hospital room with you allows you to breastfeed often and get to know one another.

If the baby goes to the nursery, let the hospital staff know to wake you when your baby is hungry.

At first, wake your baby to breastfeed every two to three hours for 10-15 minutes on each side. The milk at this time is a thin yellow liquid called colostrum. Your baby can digest the low-fat colostrum easily.

Proteins in the colostrum called immunoglobulins (your body's defense system against infections) protect your baby against infections in the environment.

Usually after about three days, your milk will come in. It may have a bluish tinge. Your breasts may tingle or feel full. Massaging the breasts in the shower or placing cabbage leaves over the breasts may help relieve engorgement.

Mastitis, yeast infections, and improper latch may be causes of breast pain. You may need breast pads, as your breasts may leak or "let down" when you are thinking about your baby.

Your provider will check your baby's weight to see if your milk supply is adequate. It is normal for babies to lose up to 10 percent of their birthweight. Babies will usually regain their birthweight by two weeks.

You can also check the number of wet diapers. By four days old, your baby should have five to six wet diapers. By five days old, the bowel movements should look like a mix of cottage cheese and mustard.

Some babies are at risk for Vitamin D deficiency and rickets, a disease which softens bones. The AAP recommends that all infants have a minimum intake of 200 IU of Vitamin D per day beginning during the first two months of life and continued through childhood and adolescence.

In short, though there may be problems with breastfeeding, they can be dealt with. Breastfeeding Awareness Month is a good time to learn about the benefits of breastfeeding and how to get a smooth start.