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Breastfeeding – as Long as We Wish

You have been breastfeeding for 9, 12, 15 months or perhaps for a number of years? You and your child enjoy it? Congratulations!

Breastfeeding is part of a special relationship between mother and child. The decision for or against breastfeeding and/or the timing of weaning should, ideally, be determined between the mother and the baby. Perhaps you have already had to defend this or you have already felt uneasy because of some comments.



Photo: © Karl Grabherr

10 Reflections on Breastfeeding Young Children

1 The world-wide public health recommendation by the WHO

(WHA 54.2-Resolution of 2001) reads as follows: “exclusive breastfeeding for six months followed by the introduction of appropriate complementary feeding and continuation of breastfeeding for up to two years of age or beyond”

2 Breastfeeding young children is normal

it represents the species-specific standard for *Homo sapiens*. For 99% of human history, physical closeness and long breastfeeding were “part of the non-negotiable protective and living conditions for young children” (Dr. Herbert Renz-Polster)

3 Mother’s milk remains a valuable food

In the second year of life (12 to 23 months), 448 ml of mother’s milk cover 29% of the child’s daily requirements for energy, 43% of the requirements for protein, 36% for energy, 75% for vitamin A, 76% for folic acid, 94% for vitamin B12 and 60% for Vitamin C. Thereby, mother’s milk remains a valuable source of protein and vitamins and provides valuable minerals and long-chain polyunsaturated fatty acids, which are important for the development of the central nervous system.

4 Mother’s milk supports the young child’s immune response

After the 6th month of life, the amount of immunoactive content (immune globulin, lysozyme and lactoferrin) increases again and may reach concentrations similar to those in colostrum. All of this is a valuable support for the young child’s own immune system, which is still developing.

5

Breastfeeding promotes the mother's health

thereby, the effects of breastfeeding are frequently dose-dependent. Every year of breastfeeding reduces the risk of developing breast cancer by 4.3%. The risk of falling ill with uterine cancer, cervical cancer and ovarian cancer can also be significantly reduced.

6

Young children "tank up" on security at their mother's breast

The instinctive behaviour and the hormones which mother and child release while breastfeeding, support the mother-child-bond and promote effective communication between the two. All of this strengthens the child's basic sense of trust.

7

Breastfeeding during a subsequent pregnancy or tandem breastfeeding

Sometimes a breastfeeding pair is surprised by a subsequent pregnancy. There are no proven risks for the mother or the unborn baby if breastfeeding is continued during a healthy pregnancy. Some mothers complain about hormone-induced nipple pain and most mothers notice a decline in the milk production. If the breastfed baby is still exclusively breastfed, regular weight control is important. Older children will get the necessary calories from complementary foods. But it may be that these children lose interest in breastfeeding during the pregnancy or the mother decides against continuing breastfeeding. Even if breastfeeding continues, the milk production goes through a colostrum phase again after birth. Once the newborn has arrived, the older child can be breastfed too, provided that the newborn gets the necessary calories via breastfeeding.

8

Weaning a young child

Breastfeeding is a relationship and, as in every relationship, both partners have wishes and needs. It is rare that mother and child want to wean at the same time. Sometimes the children end breastfeeding and the mother grieves for it a little. Far more frequently, however, mothers wish to limit or end breastfeeding. The planned weaning of an older and self-confident breastfed child does sometimes require more imagination and certainly more sensitivity, however, it can also turn out to be a very positive experience.

9

Breastfeeding promotes oral health

Sucking at the mother's breast supports the development of the jaw, promotes the correct positioning of the teeth and trains the oral muscles. If the first teeth have broken through, the worry about whether breastfeeding increases cavities arises. Science does not provide any clear answers. Possibly, very frequent and, in particular, night-time breastfeeding can increase the risk of cavities if there are also other risk factors. With careful oral hygiene, intact milk teeth can be retained even with night-time and frequent breastfeeding. Human milk is low-cariogenic and promotes healthy mouth flora. The biomechanics of breastfeeding are different than those of bottle-feeding: When drinking from the bottle, the teeth have a lot of contact with the milk, while with breastfeeding, the milk is swallowed directly and scarcely washes around the teeth.

10

Young breastfed children also manage without Mama sometimes

As a young child grows older and is already eating solids, the times when he is cared for without the mother can be expanded little by little without any need for final weaning. Thus the mother's return to work, other enterprises or visitation arrangements are also possible with a young breastfed child.

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International Board Certified Lactation Consultants are the only internationally approved breastfeeding and lactation specialists having a medical background.

The decision to breastfeed or not to breastfeed has short- and long-term impact on the health of child and mother. However, breastfeeding sometimes turns out to be difficult and perhaps professional, competent assistance is needed.

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