

Benefits of breastfeeding

It's never too early to start thinking about how you're going to feed your baby. But you don't have to make up your mind until your baby is born. In the UK, more than 73% of mothers start breastfeeding. These are some of the reasons why:

- your breast milk is perfectly designed for your baby
- breast milk protects your baby from infections and diseases
- breastfeeding provides health benefits for you
- breast milk is available for your baby whenever your baby needs it
- breastfeeding can build a strong emotional bond between you and your baby

Health benefits of breastfeeding for your baby

Breastfeeding has long-term benefits for your baby, lasting right into adulthood.

Giving nothing but breast milk is recommended for about the first six months (26 weeks) of your baby's life. After that, giving your baby breast milk alongside family foods for the first two years, or for as long as you and your baby want, will help them grow and develop healthily.



Breast milk adapts as your baby grows to meet your baby's changing needs. "Any amount of breast milk has a positive effect," says Bridget Halnan, infant feeding lead in Cambridgeshire and Fellow of the [Institute of Health Visiting](#). "The longer you breastfeed, the longer the protection lasts and the greater the benefits. Formula milk doesn't provide the same protection from illness and doesn't give you any health benefits."

Breastfeeding reduces the risk of:

- infections, with fewer visits to hospital as a result
- [diarrhoea and vomiting](#), with fewer visits to hospital as a result
- [sudden infant death syndrome \(SIDS\)](#)
- childhood leukaemia
- [type 2 diabetes](#)
- [obesity](#)

Health benefits of breastfeeding for you

Breastfeeding and making breast milk also has health benefits for you. The more you breastfeed, the greater the benefits.

Breastfeeding lowers your risk of:

- [breast cancer](#)
- [ovarian cancer](#)
- [osteoporosis \(weak bones\)](#)
- [cardiovascular disease](#)
- [obesity](#)

Busting some breastfeeding myths

"Perhaps more than any other aspect of caring for your baby, how you feed your baby seems to cause a great deal of discussion," says Bridget Halnan. "Family and friends can have strong opinions, but some aren't based on fact." Some common breastfeeding myths include:

Myth: "It's not that popular in this country."

Fact: More than 73% of women in the UK start breastfeeding, and 17% of babies are still being exclusively breastfed at three months.

Myth: "Breastfeeding will make my breasts sag."

Fact: Breastfeeding doesn't cause your breasts to sag, but pregnancy hormones can stretch the ligaments that support your breasts. Wear a well-fitting bra while you're pregnant.

Myth: "People don't like to see women breastfeeding in public."

Fact: Most people don't mind. The more it's seen, the more normal it will become. The law protects women from being asked to leave a public space while breastfeeding.

Myth: "Formula milk is basically the same as breast milk."

Fact: Almost all formula milk is made from cow's milk. It can contain bacteria, which is why it's vital to make it up with water hot enough to kill any bacteria (70C). It doesn't protect your baby from infections and diseases like breast milk does.

Myth: "Some women don't produce enough breast milk."

Fact: "Almost all women are physically able to breastfeed," says Bridget Halnan. "Early, frequent feeding and responding to your baby's cues gives you the best start to establishing your supply."

Myth: "If I breastfeed I can't have a sex life."

Fact: There's no reason why breastfeeding should stop you having sex with your partner. Your breasts may leak a little milk while you're having sex, but you can try feeding your baby beforehand or wearing a bra with breast pads in. Your vagina may feel a little drier than usual because of your breastfeeding hormones. Using some lubricant and taking things slowly will help.

Myth: "Breastfeeding hurts."

Fact: Breastfeeding is the normal way to feed a baby and it shouldn't hurt. If you experience pain in your breasts or nipples, it's usually because your baby isn't [positioned or attached](#) properly. Ask your midwife, health visitor or a breastfeeding specialist to watch a whole feed to help spot the problem.

Myth: "My nipples are flat or even inverted, so I won't be able to breastfeed."

Fact: Nipples come in all sorts of shapes and sizes. Holding your baby skin-to-skin after birth will help them find the best way to attach themselves. "Your baby breastfeeds, not nipple feeds, so as long as they can get a good mouthful of breast they should be able to feed perfectly happily," says Bridget Halnan.