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By Dr. Edward Bailey
Chief of Pediatrics,
NSMC North Shore Children's Hospital



What's best for feeding baby?

Pediatricians all agree that infants are best off if they are breast-fed, but should breast-feeding be required? The benefits of breast-feeding are well known and new research continues to strengthen the argument that both children and their moms are healthier when fed at the breast for at least three months. Current recommendations of the Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) encourage nursing for at least 12 months, and using that method exclusively for their first six to eight months.

Benefits of breastfeeding include protection from infection, diabetes, and obesity. In addition, a recent study found that youngsters who were breastfed are less likely to wet their beds. Moms also benefit, experiencing faster post-pregnancy weight loss and a decreased risk of breast and ovarian cancer.

Whatever the benefits, is breast-feeding so essential that moms should be made to feel guilty, as suggested by recent television advertisements, if they are unsuccessful at nursing or make another choice?

Breast-feeding, although clearly beneficial, is frequently difficult and creates an extra responsibility for working moms. In addition, there is conflicting information on the subject, even from the Academy of Pediatrics, making for a complicated discussion and a difficult decision for both parent and pediatrician.

A recent study, also published by the AAP and supported by the AAP Committee on Nutrition, says that solid food should be started between 4 and 6 months of age. Starting earlier is not harmful, but waiting until after 6 months to introduce solids may increase the risk of allergies.

Unfortunately, recommendations and feeding advice have often been confusing, inconsistent, and sometimes incorrect. A century ago, solid foods were withheld until infants were almost a year old. In that era, infants who weren't breast-fed were fed cow's milk or a poor substitute and many children became severely anemic and died. To treat the epidemic of anemia, iron-fortified cereal became popular and a new industry developed. Suddenly it was fashionable to feed solids and, as solid food became commercially available, the marketing genius of American industry took over.

By the mid 1960s, infants were started on rice cereal by two weeks old; fruits followed a month later, and, shortly thereafter, vegetables and meats.

Moms competed to see whose baby could start solids first. Having a pudgy, overweight infant was considered a sign of successful parenting. We now know that loading those kids up with extra fat cells, helped initiate the epidemic of obesity, diabetes and heart disease we face today.

What then should a parent do? If possible, talk to your pediatrician about feeding issues before you deliver. Consider breast-feeding carefully-- it is the natural and preferred food source. Try to nurse, even if it is difficult, as even a few weeks of breast-feeding is better than none. If you are not successful or have to stop because other priorities prevent you from continuing, don't feel guilty. Discuss your options, read all you can, and make an informed decision to go forward with confidence. Raising children in a family environment that displays parental confidence and familial security is as important as the feeding practice you choose.

Additional information that allows parents and families to make well-informed decisions can be found by contacting your pediatrician or on-line at www.aap.org. Feel free to contact me at NSMC North Shore Children's Hospital, 57 Highland Ave., Salem, MA 01907 or at ebailey@aap.org with your questions or comments.

Dr. Edward Bailey is chief of pediatrics at NSMC North Shore Children's Hospital, on staff at MassGeneral Hospital *for* Children, former board chairman of the Massachusetts Children's Trust Fund, and a father of three. He can be reached at NSMC North Shore Children's Hospital, 57 Highland Avenue, Salem, MA 01907 or at ebailey@aap.org.