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IBCLCs Help Prevent Breast Cancer

Once again, the land is awash in October pink, as the nation focuses on Breast Cancer Awareness Month. As breastfeeding experts, the members of the United States Lactation Consultant Association (USLCA) applauds efforts to raise breast cancer awareness and raise funds to explore ways to prevent and cure this disease that affects close to one in eight women.

Most research efforts to date have focused on early detection and treatment and thankfully, progress is being made. There is also evidence that many cases of breast cancer can actually be *prevented*. The National Cancer Institute cites two health behaviors that may reduce the risk of breast cancer---exercise and breastfeeding. The Susan G Komen foundation notes that breastfeeding appears to lower the risk of both estrogen receptor-positive and estrogen receptor-negative tumors with the strongest protection in premenopausal breast cancers.

A study published by the American Association for Cancer Research, concluded that breastfeeding may reduce the incidence of a particularly aggressive form of cancer found predominantly in black women in the United States. Women who give birth to more than one child but do not breastfeed are at increased risk of developing this particular type of cancer. However, the link disappears when women who give birth to multiple children breastfeed. The data suggest that black women may have a higher incidence of this aggressive form of cancer because they tend to have more children and are less likely to breastfeed.

The vast majority of women of all races enter the hospital with the intention to breastfeed. Sadly, few infants leave the hospital without being supplemented with formula, a practice which is strongly related to decreased duration and intensity of breastfeeding. Many women who do successfully establish breastfeeding wean before they had intended when they encounter breastfeeding challenges related to their return to work or school.

International Board Certified Lactation Consultants (IBCLCs) can help mothers meet their own breastfeeding goals, decreasing their risk of breast cancer, as well as ovarian cancer, and blanketing their infants with protection from many communicable and chronic diseases. A report from the Institute of Medicine recommends that all pregnant and new mothers have access to professional breastfeeding assistance and the US Surgeon General recommends that mothers have access to IBCLCs. In August of this year, access to breastfeeding counseling and support became law as a provision of the Affordable Care Act, although implementation of that coverage is spotty as yet.

IBCLCs help prevent breast cancer by helping mothers succeed in breastfeeding. Every cancer prevented is a cancer that does not need a cure. IBCLCs are internationally credentialed health care professionals with the skills needed to support breastfeeding. IBCLCs provide prenatal education and timely assistance in hospitals, health clinics, and WIC agencies. For information about becoming an IBCLC or to locate an IBCLC in your area, contact USLCA at www.uslca.org.