



2501 Aerial Center Parkway, Suite 103
Morrisville, NC 27560
Phone: 919.861.4543
Fax: 919.459.2075
www.uslca.org
info@uslca.org

More Reasons to “Heart” Breastfeeding

A Low-Cost Heart-Health Intervention for Women with No Side Effects

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RALEIGH, N.C. --- February is American Heart Month. Heart disease is the leading cause of death in women. While there is much talk about diet, exercise and smoking cessation as ways to improve heart health and prevent disease, one low-cost, side-effect free intervention that gets significantly less attention is breastfeeding.

Breastfeeding as a prevention measure for heart problems is often overlooked. An article recently published in *Breastfeeding Medicine* highlights multiple studies that found breastfeeding to have a significant impact on reducing risk of developing heart problems of all kinds.

It is well known that obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure and high cholesterol all lead to heart disease. Less well known is the fact that *breastfeeding* reduces the risk of all of these. Two separate studies, published in *Obesity* and *Maternal Child Health Journal* respectively, confirmed that breastfeeding reduces belly fat, a risk factor in heart disease. The studies found this to be true not only directly post-pregnancy, but also later in life. A study published in the *Maternal Child Health Journal* found that mothers who breastfed for 3 or more months after each birth had no more belly fat than women who had never been pregnant.

Breastfeeding reduces the risk of developing high blood pressure, even through menopause and regardless of Body Mass Index, according to an article published in *American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology*. Other articles published in journals such as *Preventative Medicine and Public Health* and the *American Journal of Epidemiology* found that breastfeeding even 1-3 months significantly reduced the risk of high blood pressure, and the longer the breastfeeding experience, the stronger the protection. As blood pressure treatment can be costly and challenging, any means of prevention should be strongly considered, especially breastfeeding with its protections for mother and baby!

Women who do not breastfeed are more likely to experience heart attacks and stroke than those who do. Breastfeeding offers significant protection from developing diabetes and high cholesterol, both of which increase the risk of cerebrovascular disease.

Improving breastfeeding rates has the very real potential to reduce the number of women with heart disease. We, as a nation, need to make sure that all breastfeeding women in every setting find the support they need to succeed. The healthcare professional proven to improving breastfeeding rates and help women meet their infant feeding goals is the International Board Certified Lactation Consultants (IBCLC). The IBCLC has the skills and knowledge to assist mothers in breastfeeding and help them through concerns and problems. For more information or to locate an IBCLC in your area, see www.USLCA.org.

Contact:

Debi Ferrarello, MSN, MS, IBCLC, RLC

Director of Marketing

info@uslca.org | 919.861.4543

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