

# Breastfeeding: another form of health insurance

By Marcy Mauler

Both human and cow's milk can provide nutrition, but the best of health is one thing that the formula fed baby may be missing. Immunity to many diseases is perhaps the greatest benefit. The baby receives about half of his immunological protection through the placenta, but is denied the other half if not breastfed until his own immunological defenses have had a chance to develop. Some doctors have stated that every baby should be breastfed for at least the first three days (usually before the true milk "comes in") just to receive the benefits of colostrum, a yellow fluid secreted in the late weeks of pregnancy and for about two weeks postpartum. Every baby would benefit from this "colostrum cocktail." There are immunity factors in this fluid which help to protect the baby from bacterial and viral diseases, including polio, staphylococci, and E. coli (which causes diarrhea, and other infections). There is less incidence of eczema, diaper rash, mumps, and measles; there are fewer respiratory infections. "Nature's vaccine" is very effective.

The mother who continues nursing her baby also continues to provide protection. It can be demonstrated in the lab that breast milk itself is anti-bacterial. A baby often receives "instant" protection; should he pick up some infection (which his mother has never experienced), he transfers the infection to his mother's breast by sucking and the mother's body, in turn, manufac-



tures antibodies which are returned to the baby via the milk. Many mothers have witnessed the whole family become ill while the baby remains healthy or has a mild case.

The breastfed infant is less subject to allergies because colostrum "coats" the intestinal walls so that whole protein molecules cannot pass through undigested into the body, causing allergic reactions. Disease organisms are also prevented from escaping into the body.

Cow's milk is one of the most common allergens. If it is not heat-treated (formula and evaporated milk are heat treated), it can cause persistent intestinal bleeding of from one to five teaspoons per day. This loss of red blood cells means a loss of iron which results in anemia. Such milk should not be given to children under the age of eighteen months.

Allergies manifest themselves in many ways. Symptoms range from "normal" crankiness to the emaciation of marasmus and include diarrhea, rashes, eczema, wheezing, vomiting, hyperactivity, learning disabilities, etc. A

family with a history of allergies would be wise to see that their children are breastfed and solids avoided for several months.

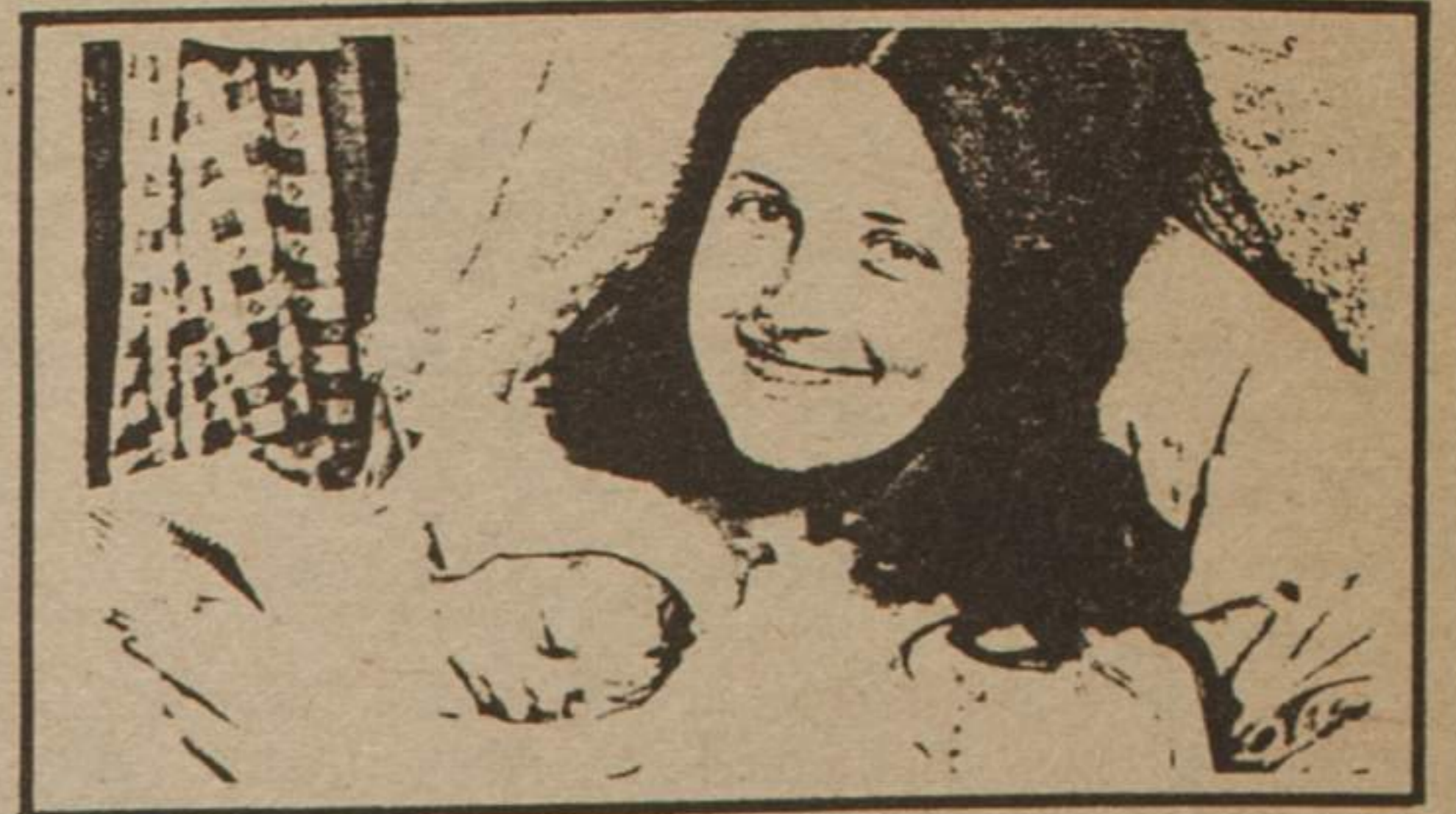
A baby is not allergic to his mother's milk; occasionally something in one mother's diet may cause a particular baby to have some reaction. By trial and error, a mother can reduce or eliminate that food for the duration of nursing. Even diet in pregnancy may affect the baby's allergic tendencies. There are babies who are so allergic that they cannot tolerate anything except their mother's milk. They must have breast milk to live.

Another benefit of breastfeeding is better oral development. The breastfed baby uses sixty times more energy in sucking to get his food than does the baby fed by bottle. This constant exercise encourages good development in his jaws and teeth. Nursing calls different muscles into action and thus minimizes oral problems such as tongue thrust (abnormal swallowing), mimic closure (the baby does not close his mouth in bottle feeding), a typical rolled short upper lip, mouth breathing, lisping, and overbite (malocclusion). Speech problems may be avoided. A New Zealand study discovered that breastfeeding made a positive difference in the age at which male children (especially) spoke clearly. (Clear speech is related to later reading ability.)

Dental cavities may be fewer. An Oregon study whose purpose was to discover whether flouridated water made a difference in the number of cavities also learned that breastfeeding helped prevent them. Children in both communities (with and without flouride) who had been breastfed at least three months had fewer cavities.

The overall long range health of breastfed babies is better. As well as fewer allergies and oral problems, there are fewer ear infections, colds, tonsillectomies, diarrheal infections, etc. This better health means fewer trips to the doctor and dentist and lower medical expenses.

Other long range benefits are also becoming known. Dr. Mark Thoman,



speaking before the Senate Subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research June 8, 1977, stated that "It is being increasingly recognized that problems of adult life such as arteriosclerosis, cardiovascular disease, hypertension, and obesity may have their origin in the salt load to the kidneys, imbalanced phosphorus-calcium ration, and other aberrations associated with feeding human infants milk intended for calves." Breast milk is rich in cholesterol (formula is not) and some studies indicate that dietary cholesterol in infancy may be necessary; it is "conductive to development of satisfactory regulatory mechanism for cholesterol metabolism in the adult." (Dr. Samuel Foman, professor of pediatrics at University of Iowa College of Medicine). Infantile obesity, which often leads to adult obesity, is less common in breastfed infants. Even if a mother has a hefty breastfed baby, his weight is more likely to be muscle than fat.

Mothers concerned about the alleged danger of PCB's etc, in breast milk should be reassured by Dr. Thoman's testimony before the Senate Subcommittee. Dr. Thoman is a clinical toxicologist. "The advantages of breastfeeding to the infant (and his mother) are so overwhelming that it would take the discovery of a dramatically serious toxic effect to offset them. Nothing like this is on the horizon. All things considered, as a nation we still have everything to gain by the encouragement of breastfeeding."



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