

Got Milk?

BY JENNIFER B. SAUNDERS

Awareness of the health benefits and cost savings of breastfeeding continues to spread.

Breastfed babies have fewer cases of diarrhea, ear infections and pneumonia, and are less likely to develop asthma or die from sudden infant death syndrome. Recent research also shows children who are breastfed are less likely to become obese. Mothers benefit as well, with lower risks of developing breast and ovarian cancers.

Although 75 percent of babies in the United States begin life being breastfed, only 31 percent are by the time they reach 9 months. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends babies be breastfed for their first year of life.

Lowering babies' rates of illnesses and infections, of course, also lowers health care costs for both families and states. This has large implications for Medicaid programs, which cover approximately 40 percent of births.

A 2010 study reported in the journal *Pediatrics* estimated that, if 90 percent of mothers exclusively breastfed for the first six months of their babies' lives, the country would save \$13 billion a year and prevent hundreds of infant deaths.

Another study reported in *Pediatrics* found that for every 1,000 babies who are not breastfed, there are 2,033 more medical office visits, 212 extra days of hospitalizations and 609 excess prescriptions in babies' first years of life. This costs managed care health systems between \$331 and \$475 for each infant.

All these are reasons why the federal government included elements in the Affordable Care Act to reduce some of the barriers breastfeeding mothers face.

The act requires most employers to provide reasonable break time and a place (other than a bathroom) for mothers to express milk. Also, health insurance plans issued or renewed after Aug. 1, 2012, must cover, without cost-sharing, breastfeeding support, counseling and equipment, when needed.

In addition, the surgeon general has issued a "Call to Action to Support Breastfeeding" with 20 steps to help make breastfeeding easier.

Most state legislatures also have tried to reduce the barriers to breastfeeding. Forty-five states, the District of Columbia and the Virgin Islands have laws that allow women to breastfeed in any public or private location. Twenty-eight states, the District of Columbia and the Virgin Islands exclude breastfeeding from public indecency laws. Twenty-four states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico have laws related to breastfeeding mothers in the workplace. And 12 states and Puerto Rico exempt breastfeeding mothers from jury duty.

The decision whether to breastfeed is a personal decision and, under some circumstances, may not be the best choice. While some lawmakers feel this is an area in which government has no role, given the benefits of breastfeeding, many policymakers continue to raise awareness about the issue and consider policies to reduce the obstacles. 

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