

No Substitute to Mother's Milk

Mrs. SEETHALAKSHMI
K. MOHAN RAO

MAMMALS suckle or feed their young with their own milk until they can hunt to forage for food themselves. This makes them different from all other living beings who depend on other sources for their nourishment. As mammals are different from one another, it is not surprising that the milk they produce differs too.

Over thousands of years each mammal has developed a milk to suit its own young. This milk takes into account animals' rate of growth, type of digestive system, natural illnesses and many other factors.

All milks have a basic similarity. It is made up of the same groups of substances, viz., water, proteins, Fats, Carbohydrates, minerals, vitamins, and anti-infective substances.

The difference occurs because these substances are present in varying proportions to suit each species.

Whale milk has a very high fat content, making it rich in calories. This is essential because the baby whale has to form a layer of thick blubber very quickly to protect it from the cold water which is its home.

The protein content of rabbit's milk is very high as compared to human milk. This is because the baby rabbit grows very fast. It doubles its birth weight in six days, whereas the human baby takes about 140 days. Milk with high protein levels is a must for every new born animal that grows quickly because proteins provide the nourishment for the growth of body tissues.

Compared with other young mammals, human babies grow very slowly. Human milk has a correspondingly lower protein level to suit this lower pace of growth.

It is true that there have been reports of mammals taking the young of other species into their care and feeding them, but this is very rare. The first time one group of mammals used another's milk to any great extent was when humans started to give their babies cow's or goat's milk. Before this if a mother could not feed her baby, another woman had to take on the task of breast feeding for the baby to survive.

Why did we choose cow's milk as our breast milk substitute?

This is a very good question because cow's milk is by no means the nearest in composition to human milk, whereas donkey's milk is much closer.

The great move towards artificial feeding came from the west where herds of cows were already being reared for meat and dairy produce, so it seemed convenient and economically sensible to convert cow's milk into powdered milk. Cows are docile, easily domesticated animals that produce large volumes of milk from a given volume of grass.

The most obvious difference between cow's milk and human milk is that cow's milk contains more proteins and less sugar. This led doctors and food scientists to modify cow's milk to resemble human milk by diluting it and adding sugar. Later, mothers bought dried or evaporated milk from the market and made their own formula by adding water and sugar.

People in different countries have used the milk from goats, donkeys, buffaloes, sheep, mares and camels for their babies. But these were only second best.

Nature gives a human mother the very best for her baby and it must be remembered that there is no substitute to a baby than the **MOTHER'S OWN MILK.**

Certain tribal people especially in the State of Andhra Pradesh, viz., Koyas, Bandas, Yanadis, Kati-Papas are in the habit of using ass's milk for their younger ones. And it goes without saying that goat's milk is much valued and being consumed by the young and old in many parts of our country. Incidentally, Mahatma Gandhi advocated the use of goat's milk as a source of good and ideal food for each person.

Medicinal Values of Certain Types of Milk

1. Goat's milk has been proved to be good for eyes owing to the rich presence of Vit. 'A' in terms of International units.

2. Ass's milk is good and helps in the healing of certain skin condition like *Taenia Varsicola* Eczema, since it is rich in Vit. +B, i.e., Thiamine.

3. Camel's milk also protects certain skin conditions like contact dermatitis.

We are thankful to the Director, Gandhigram Institute of Rural Health & Family Welfare Trust, Gandhigram.

The authors are from The Gandhigram Institute of Rural Health and Family Welfare Trust, Ambathurai, Madurai distt.

Ref.: Gopalan, C. 'Nutritive Value of Indian Food'. UNICEF News, Nov. 15, 1983.