

WHY BREAST-MILK ?

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BREAST-MILK is the food specifically provided by nature for the young ones of the mammalian species before they can consume the food of the adults. The human baby is no exception to this.

The human infant born at the end of nine months of gestation in the mother's womb is absolutely helpless. It takes him another 8-10 months before he can move about. Except for the fact that the baby has been physically separated from his mother, he depends for his nourishment exclusively on his mother's milk. Biologists believe that in the course of evolution, the human head had become large and nature had to cut short the life of the baby inside the womb, but the close contact between the mother and the child had to be maintained. The link that maintains this close contact is breast-milk.

The composition of the milk secreted by different species varies considerably; and the variation is attributed to the nature of growth and development of the new born. This means that the best food and the food of choice for the newborn human baby is human breast milk. This view is held strongly not only by those who believe that 'NATURE KNOWS BEST', but also by scientists with the most modern outlook and upbringing. The same opinion has been voiced in several international conferences and by august assemblies like the World Health Organisation. In fact, one of the yardsticks for the assessment of nutritional requirements of babies is based upon the quantity and quality of breast-milk provided by well-nourished mothers of the community at different stages of lactation.

Virtues of Breast-milk

Among the poorer sections of the population in our country, breast feeding for long periods is a common practice. It has been observed that *infants under one year of age who subsist mainly on breast-milk are singularly free from many conditions of malnutrition*. Protein-calorie malnutrition is quite common among the toddlers of 1-3 years; but in striking contrast, it is rarely seen among infants below one year. Studies carried out in the Nutrition Research Laboratories amply bear out the unique value of breast-milk in relation to the nutrition of the infant.

Colostrum or Early Secretions

The viscous thick milk secreted during the first few days after the birth of the baby is called 'colostrum.' The total yield of colostrum is not very high, but in terms of the nutrient content, it is one of the richest source of nutrients for the new born baby. Analysis of a number of samples of colostrum has shown it to be very rich in carotene and Vitamin A. Considering the fact that the diet of the pregnant and nursing women in our country is pitifully low in vitamin A, suckling of colostrum by the newborn baby would help in the building up of considerable amounts of vitamin A reserves in the liver of the baby.

Unfortunately, in our country several mothers, due to traditional beliefs and customs, avoid feeding the colostrum to the young baby. This practice would appear to need a change. *Colostrum should occupy a place of special importance in the feed of the new born in our country, as the problem of Vitamin A defi-*

ciency is one of great importance among our children.

Quantity and Quality

More than 400 Indian mothers, mostly belonging to the lower socio-economic groups, were investigated as part of these studies. Nearly ninety per cent of the mothers breast-fed their children for at least six months. Half the number of mothers breast-fed even beyond a year and a half. Dietary factors apart, beliefs such as the longer a child was breast-fed the longer was his life-span' appeared to offer the necessary psychological stimulus and satisfaction for such a situation.

A woman usually stopped breast feeding only when she became pregnant again.

The yield of milk at various stages of lactation even in women of the lower socio-economic groups indicated that there was a steep increase during the first few weeks and thereafter, the average yield of milk ranged between 450 and 650 ml. in the first year.

A newly born baby requires about three glasses of milk (about 600 ml.). This quantity of milk is sufficient for the baby as the sole food till he is about six months old. The quantity of milk put forth by the average Indian mother thus satisfies the nutritional needs of the infants for the first six months almost completely. It is only later on that the breast milk becomes insufficient for the baby's needs. At this stage, the baby should be given other nourishing foods.

The quality of the breast-milk put forth by the Indian mother is fairly good. Her milk compares fairly well with the milk of the mothers in England, America and other advanced countries. This, in spite of the fact that the mothers in these advanced countries have been nourished well, only points to the fact that Nature in her unbounded bounty has taken care to maintain the quality of the breast-milk of the poor Indian mother as best as possible, probably even at the expense of the mother's health itself.

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