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Breast Milk Ensures Children's Survival

Mother Nurses Two Children, Including 4-Year-Old, Over Nine Days



Kati Kim holds her daughter, seven-month old, Sabine Kim, in the back of a helicopter after they and her other daughter, Penelope, 4, were rescued from a remote area of southern Oregon, Monday, Dec. 4, 2006. They were airlifted to Three Rivers Community Hospital in Grants Pass. James Kim, 35, Kati's husband is still missing. (Grants Pass Daily Courier, Jim Krois/AP Photo)

By DAN CHILDS
 ABC News Medical Unit
 Dec. 5, 2006

Trapped miles from civilization in a snowbound car in subfreezing temperatures, Kati Kim had to ensure that her children survived until search parties rescued them.

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Nine days later, the helicopters came.

EDITOR'S PICKS

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Remarkably, Kim's daughters, 4-year-old Penelope and 7-month-old Sabine, were reported to be in good condition after the ordeal.

The key to this fortunate ending may have been the fact that Kim breast-fed both of them to keep them alive amid the harsh conditions once no other food was available.

Experts say the episode suggests how mother's milk, in a disastrous pinch, can make the difference in whether a child survives.

"The fact that Kati Kim was able to breast-feed both of her children for the amount of time that they were stranded most likely was lifesaving for them," says Dr. Sheela Geraghty, assistant professor of pediatrics and medical director at the Center for Breastfeeding Medicine at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center in Cincinnati.

"Breast milk not only provides the calories needed to sustain life, it also helps prevent dehydration," Geraghty says.

"I'm really, really grateful that the mother had breast milk available for the baby, as well as for her other child," says Judy Hopkinson, assistant professor at the USDA/ARS Children's Nutrition Research Center at the Baylor College of Medicine in Houston.

"This is a remarkable fluid in many ways. There is nothing better you can give a child in a disaster than breast milk."

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"Lucky for these children that mom was breast-feeding," says Kathy McCoy, a lactation consultant at Clarian Health Partners Methodist Hospital in Indianapolis. "No one ever expects disaster to happen, but when it does, breast milk is truly a lifesaver."



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Not Just Nutrition

Breast milk is often reputed for its nutritional benefits for children, but Hopkinson says human milk confers more than just sustenance.

"These kids weren't getting, I'm sure, all the calories they needed," she says. "So the breast milk was also giving them protection against serious illness, in addition to nutrition."

The idea that babies get an immune boost from breast milk is not a new one.

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, breast-fed babies suffer fewer illnesses such as diarrhea, earache and respiratory infections.

"Breast milk is really primarily an immune booster," Hopkinson says. "We think of it as nutrition, but it is really integral to the immune system."

Breast-feeding, in this case, may have also given Kim and her children another way to survive in the harsh conditions -- body heat.

"Breast-feeding her 7-month-old and 4-year-old child was undoubtedly what kept Kati Kim's children alive during their horrific snowbound ordeal," says Michelle Collins at the Vanderbilt University School of Nursing.

"The very act of holding her children against her body to nurse them would have preserved their body heat, allowing them to maintain their core body temperatures despite the freezing temperatures outside their vehicle."

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