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Mother Nature's Way: Breast feeding far superior to artificial substitutes for healthy children

By Gayane Abrahamyan  
ArmeniaNow reporter

The best thing a mother can do for her newborn, health specialists say, is breastfeed.

Babies who are breastfed are better nourished, less susceptible to disease and generally more content. Nutritionists champion the value of breastfeeding for its physiological effect, while it is also believed that the actual act of nursing creates a mother-child bond that has psychological benefits.

From the mothers' side, specialists say only 1-5 percent of women have difficulties with breast feeding.



Still, according to National Statistics Service, only one in three mothers in Armenia breastfeed, a percentage that UNICEF and international health

Breastfeeding makes for healthier, happier children. organizations hope to increase, in a republic where artificial infant food gained a strong foothold that is a challenge to loosen.

Progress though, is evident.

"In 1994 the number of children who got only mother's milk was just one percent," says Carmela Poghosyan, head of the National Program for Breast-Feeding Encouragement and Support. (21 percent of mothers were mixing breastfeeding with water-tea supplements.)

Threat of infections of upper respiratory tract and the middle ear inflammations are three times higher among artificially fed children, whose diets include water-based substitutes that lead to complications.

"The majority of children in our hospitals are those who get artificial feeding; the breast-fed children are



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incomparably less vulnerable,” says Marietta Antonyan, a pediatrician with 25 years of work experience.

The national program for breast-feeding encouragement and support was launched in Armenia in 1994, providing education toward changing attitudes and practices and instilling the message that every child should have the right to the benefits of breastfeeding.

A change of habit starts from Day One, as maternity hospitals are now trained to encourage “skin to skin” mother-child bonding.

“Before 1994 babies were kept in separate rooms, they were fed according to a set schedule. Today they are put close to the mother immediately after birth, in case there is no need for intense therapy,” says Poghosyan.

According to the director of the Arabkir district children polyclinics, pediatrician Areg Nargizyan, breast feeding dropped drastically in Armenia in the immediate years after the 1988 earthquake, when humanitarian agencies began offering free formula. “Often, mothers who were able to feed their children with breast milk gave artificial food to their children without even understanding what they did,” the doctor says.

An acceptable necessity in Armenia amidst the hardships of the early 90s, the ‘benevolence’ of free distribution of artificial food has been forbidden in Armenia since 1995. And, since, the import of such products has come under scrutiny.

“Companies frequently distribute free milk mixtures, nipples and bottles to hospitals, maternity hospitals and regularly advertise their goods on TV. They provide doctors with discount cards or special cards with the doctors’ names that provide for a certain dividend to the latter if the parents get a certain baby food from a certain pharmacy,” says Susanna Harutyunyan, chairwoman of the ‘Vstahutyun’ (‘Trust’) healthcare non-governmental organization.

The practice causes a conflict of interests, where doctors stand to profit financially for promoting a product that may not be in the baby’s best interest. Advocates of breastfeeding also point out that pressure for new mothers to buy artificial food comes at a time when they are most vulnerable.

The fact of the free distribution of milk compositions, Harutyunyan says, is sometimes a result of ignorance; the medical personnel are simply unaware they have no right to accept milk mixtures, and advertising of the products is a violation of a 1998 amendment to Armenia’s Law on Advertising.

Specialists say that up to 30 percent of newborns never taste mother’s milk and up to 80 percent are switched to artificial food beginning at 5 months old. This unhealthy trend is compounded by the fact that none of the laboratories in Armenia is capable of sophisticated tests for certain bacteria, although imported food routinely

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undergoes laboratory tests in accordance with Ministry of Trade and Economic Development regulations.

The almost uncontrollable market of baby food causes special concern with experts because of the widely available HIPP namebrand teas that say the tea can be given even to a one week-old baby.

The global stragey adopted by the World Health Organization in 2002 says children less than 6 months of age should get only breast milk, and in case the child is artificially fed, it should get only milk mixtures and not teas or porridges.

“(The teas) are harmful, because they include a number of herbal agents that can increase the permeability of the child’s intestine walls that in turn facilitates the growth of allergy and infectious illnesses penetrability,” says Harutyunyan.

“One can’t exclude the possibility there are soy based milk mixtures on the Armenian market at the moment that increase the level of the female hormones in four month baby boys’ organisms for 200 times besides the numerous negative consequences they have, they may also cause cancer,” says Harutyunyan.

The RA Ministry of Healthcare, the Armenian offices of UNICEF and the World Health Organization jointly warned HIPP and Nestle companies of documented violations.

“Nestle accepted the violations and improved the products, while HIPP has not answered the letter to this day. The teas and the porridges by various companies are freely sold everywhere and harm our children,” says Harutyunyan.

Health specialists emphasize that, even if there were no concern about the ingredients in artificial food for infants, the best food for a baby comes from the mother who bore her.



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