Breastfeeding*

How breastfeeding works for birth control

You can delay your return to fertility for up to six months post-partum if breastfeeding is your baby's only source of food day and night. Frequent stimulation of the breast by around-the-clock suckling helps delay the return of ovulation – you won't produce an egg, so you can't get pregnant. Once the baby begins to take supplemental liquids or foods, or is more than six months old, breastfeeding is not reliable for birth control.

In order for this method to be effective ask each of the questions below. If the answer is yes, your risk of pregnancy is increased.

1. Have your periods returned?
2. Are you giving your infant other food, supplements or formula; either day or night?
3. Is your baby more than six months old?

Women who use this method should sleep near their babies and feed on demand 24 hours per day.

Breastfeeding is the Lactational Amenorrhea Method (LAM).

(continued)

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How to use breastfeeding

Ask your doctor, midwife, healthcare provider or lactation educator about breastfeeding and how effective it would be for your situation.

Effectiveness

Breastfeeding can be a highly effective, temporary method of birth control. If a woman feeds her infant only her breast milk (no other food or formula), her period has not returned, and her infant is less than six months old, then breastfeeding can provide more than 98% protection (perfect use) from pregnancy. The effectiveness greatly decreases as soon as breastfeeding is reduced, bottle-feeding is added and/or regular food supplements are introduced, menses returns, or when the baby reaches six months of age. You should talk to a trained healthcare provider or educator for more information.

Women who use progestin-only hormonal contraception (such as the mini-pill) while they are breastfeeding have almost 100% protection from pregnancy because of the combined contraceptive effect of the two methods.

Benefits of breastfeeding

For most mothers, breastfeeding is easy to use, with no cost for birth control.

Potential disadvantages

You may get pregnant again if you do not breastfeed "on demand" (continually, any time the baby wants it), 24 hours per day. A woman may ovulate before her periods return after childbirth. As a result, she could become pregnant again before her periods return.

Breastfeeding will not give you protection against HIV (AIDS) or sexually transmitted infections (STIs) such as chlamydia, herpes, genital warts (HPV), gonorrhea, hepatitis B and syphilis.

Potential risks

No health risks.

GENERAL REFERENCE: Contraceptive Technology (CT):
20th Rev. Ed., 2011 and CT Update (monthly newsletter).