

Beauty of Breastfeeding

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A natural elixir exists that reduces childhood suffering from respiratory infections, diarrhea, and ear infections and will save almost 1 million children worldwide every year. Women who provide this valuable liquid to their children have a lower risk of getting breast cancer and may have a lower risk of overweight, obesity, diabetes, and ovarian cancer. This unique drink contains thousands of ingredients which, if consumed as a child, will enhance intelligence and result in higher adult income earnings. The elixir is free and available everywhere.

Sound too good to be true? You might think so, since millions of people choose not to provide this perfect food source to their children. This magical liquid, which can help reduce death and disease, is human milk. Yet, despite robust evidence backing up human milk's myriad benefits, this amazing mother made substance is not exclusively provided to most infants for the first 6 months after birth. As a neonatologist, I feel compelled to advocate for exclusive breastfeeding to improve child development, mother–child bonding, and short- and long-term health outcomes for women and their children.

An estimated 140 million babies will be born worldwide this year (Our World in Data, 2020). Around 90 million of these babies, nearly two out of three infants globally, will not be exclusively breastfed for the recommended 6 months (World Health Organization, 2020). Reduced breastfeeding has global consequences because breastfeeding saves the lives of children and women; every year, a lack of exclusive breastfeeding results in an estimated 823,000 deaths in children < 5 years of age and 20,000 deaths in women from breast cancer (Victora et al., 2016). Children who are not breastfed will have a lower intelligence and will cost the world \$302 billion annually or 0.49% of world gross national income (Rollins et al., 2016). In contemplating feasible, effective, and affordable ways to optimize childhood health, the following question is raised: Is there any other cost-free, universally available initiative that can claim better benefits than breastfeeding?

As care givers, we have the opportunity to advocate for breastfeeding in a thoughtful, compassionate, and positive way, which respects women who are unable to or choose not to

breastfeed, but also educates and supports all women who can breastfeed. Sadly, significant racial disparity in exclusive breastfeeding rates between black and white infants remains a dire problem in the United States (Griswold et al., 2018). Racism, bias, and discrimination have adverse effects on breastfeeding care, support, and outcomes for black women, (Robinson et al., 2019) a crisis which requires urgent, increased, and ongoing efforts to address the underlying individual, institutional, and structural forms of racism that continue to contribute to poor maternal and child health outcomes. Racial barriers should never prevent women and children from the beautiful gift and abundant benefits of breastfeeding.

Increasing exclusive breastfeeding rates worldwide has the potential to save hundreds of thousands of lives and save hundreds of billions of dollars every year. Given the immense financial impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic, endorsing exclusive breastfeeding seems especially prudent from an economic perspective. We need to continue to advocate for the free, safe, and natural gift of human milk for all women and children worldwide, since their health and survival depends on it. As a way to raise awareness and promote the benefits of breastfeeding for mothers and babies everywhere, I painted *Beauty of Breastfeeding* and wrote the poem *Human Milk*.

Human Milk

More than milk I am
Not ordinary but extraordinary
Like the mother, mom, mama who made me
I can't be mimicked

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Precious child, I wait ready to flow into you
 When you hunger, there I am
 To greet your lips, to sooth, satiate,
 Comfort and calm you. I provide

More than water, protein, sugars, and fat
 Loving child, I am so much more than that
 I am more than enzymes and antibodies
 I am more than hormones and stem cells

I am a gift—Mother made just for you
 Drink me. Thrive from me.
 I will defend and fight for you
 I will nourish and heal you

They call me liquid gold, but I am greater than gold
 Gold won't vitalize your tens of trillions of cells
 I bind the beautiful and shape the wonderful
 My liquid helps you become solid.

I am perfect, prized, and free
 I unite, bond, and protect
 I come from all colors
 I am the best milk, I am human breast milk

Please do not waste me.
 Celebrate and treasure me!
 Let me be me
 For I am for you.

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