

YOUR *pregnancy*

THE BEST WAY TO FEED YOUR BABY

A lot of sisters just can't relate to breast-feeding, but it's as ancient as that first Black mother to walk the earth—and it's healthy and free!

BY JUDITH SPRINGER RIDDLE

Breast-feeding is absolutely the best gift I could have given my three babies!" says HEART & SOUL's publicity manager, Teresa Lyles Holmes, 33. "I originally decided to breast-feed for practical reasons—like the fact that it was a natural, healthy, and free method of feeding my baby. But once I saw how beautiful the experience was with my

first daughter, Nicole, who's now 7, it became even more important to me to share those same feelings of warmth, security, and comfort with my next two daughters—Nichelle, who's 4, and Nia, who just turned 3."

I understand Teresa's commitment. The moment I discovered that I was pregnant, I wanted to breast-feed my baby. My mom, however, who had never breast-fed, cringed at the idea. But I went ahead with my breast-feeding plans—with my husband's blessing. And I'm glad I did. Breast-feeding has been one of the most challenging and rewarding experiences of my life.

Like my mom, not all sisters are so gung-ho about breast-feeding. In fact, Black mothers are almost 50 percent less likely than White mothers to breast-feed their babies. But since we often give birth to low-birth-weight babies who need extra nurturing and care, we really should give it a try. Breast-feeding's health benefits for babies are undeniable, and there are some great health perks for moms, too. So let's get it all out on the table and examine some of the most common problems women have with breast-feeding, and why we should give our babies our own milk.

"MY HUSBAND BELIEVES THAT MY BREASTS ARE FOR HIM—ONLY."

This line of thinking is very common among Black men—and some women. And for good reason. Historically, Black women have been portrayed in this

society as sexually loose sex objects, which has made us overly sensitive and self-conscious about our bodies and sexuality as a whole. Some of us won't breast-feed for fear that our husbands will become jealous.

"In this case, the baby becomes another person who is not supposed to have access to the woman's breasts. The man wants something he can count on that's his," says Marlene F. Watson, Ph.D., a contributing editor of HEART & SOUL. "And if a woman has to feed her baby in front of people, the man won't want anyone to see his wife," Watson adds.

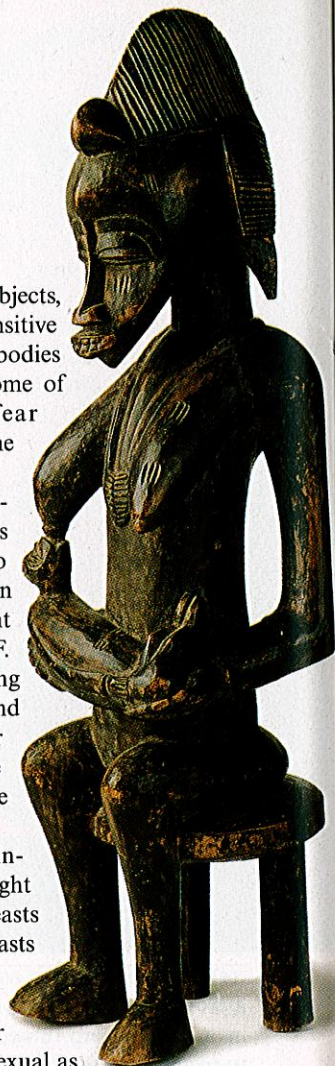
These inhibitions are so instilled in us that we've lost sight of the fact that a woman's breasts serve two functions. "Our breasts produce milk to feed our babies. All mammals produce milk to nurture their young. So our breasts are a sexual as well as a nurturing organ," says Vickie R.

Nizin, a leader at La Leche League International, a nonprofit organization that offers women information on breast-feeding, as well as peer support.

Part of our reluctance to breast-feed also stems from not knowing that breast milk contains proteins and antibodies that help newborns fight off infections and other health threats. Studies have shown that infants who are breast-fed for at least four to six months have far fewer and less severe ear infections, asthma complications, colds, and food allergies, as well as fewer cases of bronchitis, pneumonia, eczema, diarrhea, and constipation. In addition, breast milk enhances the development of the baby's brain and nervous system. And because breast-feeding reduces a woman's risk of breast cancer (before menopause), it's good for Mom's health too.

"I WON'T FEEL COMFORTABLE BREAST-FEEDING IN PUBLIC."

These feelings are tied to our uneasiness about our sexuality, and the fact that most public places don't offer private, mother-friendly accommodations. If you're shopping at a department store, for instance, you may have to go to a restroom that may not have



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any comfortable seating. Or, if you're at a restaurant, you may have to risk getting a lot of stares.

According to Eloise Skelton-Forrest, M.D., M.P.H., an obstetrician-gynecologist at Alhambra Women's Medical Group in California, your solution is to dress for the breast-feeding occasion. Many shops sell fashions tailor-made for breast-feeding moms, including nursing bras, which make discreet breast-feeding easier and more comfortable. But any casual pullovers, dressy blouses, or two-piece outfits will allow you to nurse conveniently and discreetly at home or in public.

"WHAT IF I DON'T HAVE ENOUGH MILK AND CAN'T BREAST-FEED?"

Many women worry about this. But it's extremely rare that a mother cannot produce enough milk for her baby. Those who can't have what is called low-milk syndrome—a rare condition that affects maybe 5 percent of new moms. The majority of us, though, are simply misinformed about breast-feeding mechanics, milk-supply development, and what to expect in the weeks after birth.

"We're unfamiliar with how often a newborn needs to nurse," Nizin says. "Many babies need to nurse at least every two hours, which will inevitably build your milk supply. Nighttime

nursing is also very important to establishing a healthy milk supply. The more you nurse, the more milk you'll produce."

So unless you're part of that rare 5 percent, you can breast-feed—as long as you don't have HIV or AIDS (breast milk that contains HIV can transmit the disease to your baby) and aren't taking medication (such as for chronic disease) that might harm your baby, according to Ezra Davidson Jr., M.D., professor of obstetrics and gynecology at the Charles R. Drew University of Medicine and Science in Los Angeles.

"BREAST-FEEDING IS PAINFUL."

Until you get used to feeding your baby, sore nipples, unfortunately, can come with the breast-feeding territory. The key to preventing soreness and injury is to learn how to protect the nipples by properly positioning your baby (his stomach to yours), holding your baby close during feedings (so he doesn't pull away), and removing the nipple from his mouth afterward. "You can attend breast-feeding classes at your local hospital or contact a lactation consultant, La Leche League International, a doula, or a peer counselor who is an experienced breast-feeding mom," Nizin says.

To soothe sore nipples, rub 100 per-

cent pure lanolin cream around the areola area and air-dry. Tip: Breast milk will work too.

"BREAST-FEEDING IS PRIMITIVE AND BACKWARD."

Some of us have inherited this notion from mothers and grandmothers who "associate breast-feeding with being poor," Skelton-Forrest says. "Years ago it was something you did because you couldn't afford formula." Other sisters may associate breast-feeding with our painful past. "During slavery, Black women were the wet nurses. Most White women didn't want to breast-feed their children, so they ordered a slave or a Black wet nurse to do it for them. It was looked upon as very negative," Nizin says.

Carrying around the pain from our past is certainly understandable, but we need to let it go. The advantages of breast-feeding far outweigh any of its past negative images. It's the healthiest food you can give to your baby. And it's one way for Mom and baby to form a close, nurturing bond.

"I'LL BE GOING BACK TO WORK SOON, SO WHY START SOMETHING I CAN'T FINISH?"

Breast-feeding for even one week is better than not breast-feeding at all. It will still benefit your baby's health, growth, and development. Some experts recommend sticking with it for 6 to 12 weeks for maximum benefit. Many women choose to breast-feed through their maternity leave.

If you continue to breast-feed after returning to work, you have several options: You can pump your milk a few times a day for the next day's food supply. Or, if your job is flexible enough and your baby is close to work, you can get to her for feedings. Another, more common option is to use your back-to-work time to wean the baby gradually, by breast-feeding at night and in the morning and introducing bottle-feeding during the day.

Breast milk is simply the best milk. And like most of the best things in life, it's free. ♥

Judith Springer Riddle is the senior research editor at HEART & SOUL.

Getting Baby Off to The BEST START

Any woman who has ever breast-fed knows that it's a learned skill that takes time to master. Here's how to get started:

SCHOOL YOURSELF. While you're pregnant, curl up with some good breast-feeding books, such as *The Complete Book of Breast-Feeding* (Workman Publishing; \$8.95), *The Womanly Art of Breast-Feeding* (La Leche League International; \$10.95), and *The Working Woman's Guide to Breast-Feeding* (Meadowbrook; \$7). You can also order the free pamphlet "Breast-Feeding Your Baby" by sending a business-size SASE to the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, Resource Center/AP029, P.O. Box 96920, Washington, D.C., 20090-6920.

CALL FOR HELP. Contact your local hospital for info on breast-feeding classes. Some hospitals have staff lactation consultants who can solve breast-feeding problems over the phone or at your home. To find one in your area call the International Lactation Consultant Association at (312) 541-1710.

TALK WITH A MOTHER WHO'S BEEN THERE, DONE THAT. In many areas of the country, La Leche International has volunteers who will advise you by phone. Call (800) LA-LECHE.