



Probiotics

A New Infant Formula Feature

By Sam Gaines

As it always has been, breastfeeding is the gold standard in feeding your baby. Why? Because breast milk contains nutrients and other factors that promote growth and immunity. Breastfed babies typically have healthier immune systems compared to formula-fed infants. That's why breastfed babies tend to get fewer infections and recover more quickly when they do get them.

Babies are born with a sterile (bacteria-free) digestive system, which soon after birth becomes colonized with the bacteria from the mother and the environment. Breast milk contains large quantities of complex starches that favor the presence of health-promoting bacteria in the infant's digestive system, unlike infant formula. That's one reason why the digestive bacteria in breastfed babies are different from those of formula-fed infants.

How Probiotics Work

The most predominant bacteria that colonize a breastfed infant's digestive system are Bifidobacteria. When they are present in the digestive system, these types of microbes are also considered probiotic bacteria. Probiotic bacteria favor the development of a healthy digestive tract and good overall general health. The complex starches in breast milk that promote the growth of the Bifidobacteria and other beneficial bacteria species are categorized as prebiotics.

Breast milk does more than enhance your baby's immune system and general digestive health. For most healthy babies, it's easy to digest and may have other health benefits that extend beyond infancy, according to some recent research. It's also easier on the pocketbook because it's free.

When Breast Milk Isn't an Option

For some mothers, though, breastfeeding isn't always an option. Some mothers don't breastfeed, or choose to combine breastfeeding with supplemental formula feeding. Indeed, infant formula has offered enough benefits to make it a "good enough" option to breastfeeding, even if it could never completely replace what nature provides in a mother's breast milk. While formula-fed

babies don't get all the complex nutrients or immune benefits that are in breast milk, they do receive the nutrition necessary for an infant to grow and thrive.

In addition to good basic nutrition, infant formula products sold in the United States offer other options for babies with special dietary needs. Some babies have a true cow's milk allergy or significant medical conditions that impair normal digestion. For these babies, there are soy-based formulas and formulas with hydrolyzed (predigested) proteins. The content of infant formulas is regulated and is sometimes modified by the manufacturer with the intent to improve the overall health benefit to the consuming infant. Until recently, however, none of the infant formulas sold in the United States contained either probiotic bacteria or prebiotic nutrients.

A New Formula Option

A new infant formula is now available in the United States that contains probiotics. This new formula adds *Bifidobacterium lactis*, a key type of probiotic microorganism present in a healthy breastfed baby's digestive system. While this newly available formula doesn't provide the full benefits of mother's milk, it is designed to increase a formula-fed baby's digestive bacteria to a level closer to that of breastfed babies. This type of infant formula has been commercially available abroad for more than 15 years.

The results of scientific research using probiotic bacteria to treat or prevent some childhood disorders have been encouraging. Probiotics have shown a benefit in reducing antibiotic-associated diarrhea and acute gastroenteritis (diarrhea due to "stomach viruses"), lowering the risk of food allergy, and improving infantile colic.

It is widely believed that the newly available probiotic-containing infant formula will balance a baby's digestive bacteria to favor the growth of *Bifidobacterium lactis*. But the overall long-term benefits to formula-fed babies remain uncertain. For example, researchers don't know if the health benefits of probiotic formula will continue after the formula is stopped. Further research into the overall health benefits of breast milk and infant formula may provide the answers in the near future. ●