

# The Power of Breastfeeding

Analysis by [Dr. Joseph Mercola](#) December 30, 2024

## Key points:

- Breast milk provides a unique, dynamic blend of antibodies, hormones and stem cells that adapt to infant needs, offering superior benefits compared to formula feeding
- The formula industry's marketing tactics and hospital practices have normalized formula feeding, undermining breastfeeding through medical institutional funding and strategic advertising campaigns
- Oxytocin released during breastfeeding strengthens mother-child bonding, reduces postpartum health risks and helps regulate babies' emotional development while providing long-term health benefits
- Modern medical interventions and arbitrary growth charts create unnecessary barriers to breastfeeding, often leading to premature formula supplementation despite normal infant development patterns
- Extended breastfeeding, naturally occurring between 2.5 to 7 years, faces cultural stigma in Western societies, despite its benefits for immune system development and emotional resilience

In a powerful episode of *Doctors and Scientists on Children's Health Defense TV*, host Brian Hooker, Ph.D., brings together two experts, Romy Karz Rapoport and Jessica Isles, to discuss the often underappreciated yet remarkable benefits of breastfeeding.

Rapoport and Isles, both advocates for maternal and infant health, shared insights into the body's innate wisdom and the need for nurturing practices that respect natural design. The episode explores how breastfeeding isn't just a feeding option but a support system for both mother and child. Unfortunately, our culture's increasing reliance on formula, driven by industry marketing, has led to an undervaluing of this ancient practice.

## Why Breastfeeding Matters — More Than Just Nutrition

Breastfeeding goes far beyond mere sustenance. Rapoport and Isles emphasize that breast milk provides a total support system for infants, one that cannot be replicated. Rapoport explains that breastfeeding isn't an extra like taking a vitamin; it's the baseline, the natural norm.

Unlike formula, breast milk offers a unique blend of antibodies, immune factors, hormones and stem cells that tailor themselves to the needs of the child. It's dynamic, adjusting its composition in response to cues from the baby's saliva and feeding frequency.

Breastfed infants have better immune responses, lower risks of respiratory infections and better cognitive development. Studies suggest that breastfed babies often score higher on IQ tests, and Rapoport added, "Breastfed babies have improved intellectual and cognitive development, setting them up to thrive."

Additionally, mothers who breastfeed benefit as well, with lower risks of postpartum depression, premenopausal cancers, osteoporosis and other diseases. Breastfeeding is also instrumental in establishing a bond between mother and child. Rapoport described it as a "unique dance," where the mother's and baby's bodies communicate through hormones and physical contact.

This bond not only helps regulate the baby's emotions but also fosters a sense of security, which has lasting psychological benefits. Far beyond simple feeding, breastfeeding provides a profound emotional and physiological connection.

## **The Formula Industry's Spin — Marketing Formula as the Norm**

One of the major challenges to breastfeeding is the formula industry's powerful influence. Over the past few decades, formula has become deeply embedded in public perception, often regarded as equivalent to, if not superior to, breast milk. This shift is largely due to strategic marketing. Isles noted, it's not a conspiracy theory; it's simply business. The formula industry is in direct competition with every woman's milk-producing breasts.

The industry's tactics go beyond advertisements. **Formula companies** fund medical institutions, including the American Academy of Paediatrics, and lobby against policies that support breastfeeding, such as paid maternity leave. Hospitals distribute free formula samples, creating an impression that it's not only safe but endorsed by the medical community.

Isles emphasized that the formula industry has created a cultural equivalency between formula and breast milk, and that normalization undermines breastfeeding. The formula industry also taps into our societal obsession with convenience. Mothers are told that formula will allow them more freedom and enable babies to sleep through the night, which disrupts the breastfeeding cycle.

Isles shared that sleep training is a massive industry, and the formula companies promote it, knowing that it undermines breastfeeding. This misleads mothers into thinking formula is a more viable option, making them less likely to attempt breastfeeding.

## **Oxytocin and the Biology of Breastfeeding**

Breastfeeding aligns perfectly with our biological design. At the heart of this connection is oxytocin, often called the "love hormone," which plays a crucial role in bonding, birth and breastfeeding. This hormone facilitates milk let down and fosters a deep connection between mother and baby.

Oxytocin also supports the mother's health by reducing the risk of postpartum haemorrhage. Furthermore, women who breastfeed have lower risks of developing premenopausal cancers, diabetes and osteoporosis, while babies benefit from the immunity-boosting and brain-development properties of breast milk. In the episode, breastfeeding is described as nature's way of supporting the mental and physical health of both mother and child.

The emotional benefits of oxytocin extend to the baby, helping regulate their emotions and fostering a sense of security. Babies who breastfeed often experience less stress and cry less, which further strengthens the mother-child bond.

## **How Modern Birth Practices Create Barriers to Breastfeeding**

The episode also highlighted how current medical practices interfere with breastfeeding. Many interventions during labour and delivery — such as IV fluids, epidurals and induced labours — impact breastfeeding success. When birth is overly medicalized, it disrupts the natural flow of hormones that facilitate breastfeeding.

Formula samples handed out in hospitals further complicate matters. Many mothers receive formula samples and branded weight charts that show formula-fed babies growing at a faster rate than breastfed ones. Isles noted that a breastfeeding mother may feel pressured to supplement with formula if her baby seems underweight compared to these charts. But those charts don't consider the natural growth patterns of breastfed babies.

Another issue is how early weight loss in breastfed new-borns is handled. Isles explained that a weight loss of up to 10% in the first week is normal for breastfed babies as they adjust to feeding.

But some health care providers quickly suggest supplementation if a baby loses weight, creating unnecessary alarm. As a result, many new moms are convinced something is wrong when it's not, leading them to supplement with formula, which disrupts breastfeeding.

## **Re-establishing Breastfeeding as the Norm**

Rapoport and Isles stressed the importance of reframing breastfeeding as the natural standard for infant feeding, stating that we need to see breastfeeding as the baseline for human health. Our current culture, influenced by formula marketing, often views breastfeeding as a lifestyle choice rather than a biological norm.

To counteract this narrative, Isles and Rapoport advocate for more community support. Organizations like La Leche League, a global network providing free, peer-led breastfeeding support, play an important role. Lactation consultants and doulas are also invaluable resources, offering guidance and reassurance through the initial weeks of breastfeeding.

Expectations also need to shift. Rapoport recommends that new mothers expect the first four to six weeks of breastfeeding to come with challenges. Breastfeeding may take time to establish, and it's normal for both mother and baby to need an adjustment period.

## **Addressing Cultural Stigma Around Extended Breastfeeding**

Another barrier to successful breastfeeding is the cultural stigma surrounding extended breastfeeding. In cultures without artificial weaning practices, the natural weaning age could range from 2.5 to 7 years. However, in the West, mothers often feel pressured to stop breastfeeding once their child reaches 1 year of age.

Further, societal expectations undermine breastfeeding, often framing it as inconvenient or unnecessary once a baby reaches a certain age. Women who breastfeed beyond a year are often seen as "weirdos" or overly attached, Isles explained. Yet, extended breastfeeding offers immense benefits, particularly in boosting the child's immune system, supporting brain development and nurturing emotional resilience.

Formula companies fuel this cultural stigma by marketing formula as the norm and perpetuating the idea that extended breastfeeding is unnecessary or excessive. If more women knew the benefits of extended breastfeeding; they'd likely feel more empowered to continue.

## **Practical Steps to Support Breastfeeding Mothers**

Isles and Rapoport shared several practical solutions for fostering a breastfeeding-friendly culture. From policy changes to increased community support, these steps can make a meaningful difference:

**Policy changes** — Paid maternity leave and breastfeeding financial incentives would allow mothers the time and resources to breastfeed without economic strain.

**Medical training** — The episode stressed the importance of breastfeeding education in medical schools, explaining that doctors and nurses need a foundation in breastfeeding to support, not hinder, mothers during this critical time.

**Cultural representation** — Normalizing breastfeeding in public spaces, workplaces and media will help break down societal barriers and portray breastfeeding as an accepted, normal part of life.

**Financial support** — Formula companies lobby against paid maternity leave, knowing that economic pressure forces many women to stop breastfeeding earlier than they'd like.

**Empowering partners and families** — Support from family, especially fathers, greatly increases breastfeeding success. Educating entire families about breastfeeding makes a meaningful difference.

## **Changing expectations**

Rapoport and Isles emphasize setting realistic expectations for breastfeeding, especially in the early weeks. Along with expecting a few weeks of challenges, women should seek support if they need it.

## **Embracing the Female Body's Natural Abilities**

Isles and Rapoport explained that supporting breastfeeding is essential to what Isles termed "biological feminism." This concept honours women's natural abilities and celebrates the incredible biology of breastfeeding. By embracing biological feminism, society fosters healthier relationships between mothers and children, supports women's health and even improves public health.

Breastfeeding is, in many ways, a powerful feminist act. It emphasizes that women's bodies are capable, that they are not merely equal to men but unique in ways that deserve respect and support. "Celebrating the miracle of the female body will bring humanity closer and help us all flourish," Isles says.

**Breastfeeding** is a vital practice that our culture has, unfortunately, come to view as optional or burdensome. By providing education, support and policy reform, we can reclaim breastfeeding as the norm and recognize it as an essential part of health and well-being. Isles and Rapoport's insights highlight that women's bodies are uniquely capable and powerful in ways that need to be celebrated and supported.

As Isles put it, "We're so strong. We can rule the world. Women are amazing, and yet, we can't breastfeed ... we shouldn't even try ... These are the messages portrayed in the media." This episode challenges the forces that have shaped modern motherhood and calls for a return to natural health practices that honour both mother and child.

However, I understand that not all moms can breastfeed. Those who didn't breastfeed from the start, or who have stopped for weeks or months, may find it difficult to go back to breastfeeding, as you cannot restart lactation at will. In this case, resorting to formula milk may be the only choice. But instead of buying commercially sold infant formula, I recommend making your own infant formula (recipe available on Dr. Mercola's website).

It's time to acknowledge breastfeeding for what it is: the cornerstone of infant and maternal health. Let's support and celebrate this connection, making breastfeeding a recognized and valued choice for families.