

Breastfeeding: Maternal and Infant Aspects

Committee on Health Care for Underserved Women

Committee on Obstetric Practice

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ABSTRACT: Evidence continues to mount regarding the value of breastfeeding for both women and their infants. The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists strongly supports breastfeeding and calls on its Fellows, other health care professionals caring for women and their infants, hospitals, and employers to support women in choosing to breastfeed their infants. Obstetrician–gynecologists and other health care professionals caring for pregnant women should provide accurate information about breastfeeding to expectant mothers and be prepared to support them should any problems arise while breastfeeding.

Research in the United States and throughout the world indicates that breastfeeding and human milk provide benefits to infants, women, families, and society. In 1971, only 24.7% of mothers left the hospital breastfeeding. Since then, breastfeeding initiation rates have been increasing because of a growing awareness of the advantages of breast milk over formula, but they have not yet reached the goal set by the U.S. Public Health Service for Healthy People 2010 (1). In 2005, 72.9% of new U.S. mothers initiated breastfeeding (2). Although this is close to the target rate of 75% in the early postpartum period, there is still a long way to go to achieve target breastfeeding rates of 50% at 6 months and 25% at 12 months (1). Improvement in breastfeeding initiation rates has been uneven as women attempt to overcome practical obstacles. Women and infants who could benefit most from breastfeeding are often within population groups (geographic, racial, economic, and educational) with low rates of breastfeeding. Education and support services can improve rates among these as well as other women. Breastfeeding education and support are an economical investment for health plans and employers because there are lower rates of illness among infants who are breastfed.

Breastfeeding is the preferred method of feeding for newborns and infants. Nearly every woman can breastfeed her child. Exceptions are few and include those women who take street drugs or do not control alcohol use, have an infant with galactosemia, are



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ment that will support breastfeeding, whether through change in hospital practices, through community efforts, or through supportive legislation.

The advice and encouragement of the obstetrician–gynecologist during preconception, prenatal, post-