

# UNDERSTANDING the Benefits of Breast Milk



In most cases, breast milk is the best food for your baby. Breast milk improves the **immune system**, which fights off illness and disease. It also helps the baby's **digestive tract** develop. In the long-term, babies fed breast milk have a lower risk of asthma, ear infections, diarrhea and vomiting, lung infections, and type 2 diabetes.

## My baby was premature. Can I still breastfeed?

Babies can almost always benefit from breast milk. However, a premature baby may not be ready to breastfeed. The ability to coordinate sucking, swallowing, and breathing doesn't usually develop until 34 to 36 weeks' gestational age.

In the meantime, your baby often can have breast milk through a feeding tube. If so, talk to the NICU team about the best way to pump and store your milk.

*For more information about feeding tubes, ask for the sheet titled "Understanding Feeding Tubes."*

## My baby is sick. Can I still breastfeed?

The answer depends on your baby's health. If your baby is being fed by bottle or tube, you may be able to breastfeed or pump breast milk for the baby. *Talk with the NICU team about your options.*

If your baby needs TPN (**total parenteral nutrition**), then the baby may or may not be ready for breast milk. If not, it is likely that you will be able to pump and store your breast milk for later. *Talk to the NICU team about what's best for your baby.*

*For more information about TPN, ask for the sheet titled "Understanding Nutrition in the NICU."*



