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Fuel for Feeding:
Nutrition for Breastfeeding Mothers

► Proper nutrition while breastfeeding is just as important as proper nutrition while pregnant. Providing your body the nutrients it needs to produce breast milk supports your baby's growth and development as well as helps you maintain health and energy.

In Alabama, about 76 percent of mothers initiate breastfeeding, but only 39 percent continue at 6 months. One of the factors influencing breastfeeding duration is maternal energy and health status. Proper nutrition not only supports milk production, but it impacts maternal well-being and gives lactating women the ability to maintain breastfeeding for longer.

Energy Needs

There is an old saying "eating for two" when it comes to pregnancy and lactation. That is because breastfeeding is one of the most energy-intensive physiological processes that the body undergoes. As such, it is essential that mothers increase their energy consumption (calories) with the right foods and drinks during this time.

Calories should be fueled by nutrient-rich foods, such as beans, lentils, fruits, vegetables, and lean proteins, rather than empty calories that come from processed snack foods, fast foods, and sugary drinks. For example, instead of a lunch of fried chicken with french fries, you might try baked chicken, collard greens, and cornbread. The calorie intake is similar, but nutrient density is much higher—supplying iron, calcium, and fiber rather than excess sodium and saturated fat.

If mothers do not increase their energy intake, the body will draw from maternal fat and nutrient stores to sustain milk production. Over time, this can lead to fatigue, weight loss beyond healthy levels, and micronutrient depletion. Research shows that insufficient energy intake may not significantly reduce the total volume of milk produced, but it can impact the nutrient composition of the milk, particularly in long-term breastfeeding.

Women who breastfeed need to consume about 340 to 400 calories per day beyond what is recommended for a nonlactating woman. For example, a moderately active nonpregnant woman needs to consume anywhere from 1,600 to 2,400 calories per day; those numbers increase to 2,000 to 2,800 calories per day once a woman begins lactating. This number is impacted by age, body mass index, activity level, or whether the mother is exclusively breastfeeding or feeding with a combination of formula and breast milk. The United States Department of Agriculture provides a free online calculator to help you calculate caloric and nutritional needs based on varying factors.

Macronutrient Essentials

Macronutrients are important substances to aid milk production and health for you and your baby (table 1). In general, macronutrients are what our bodies use as primary sources of energy and are considered the building blocks of good health. Examples include protein, carbohydrates, and fat.

Protein assists with tissue repair and is a primary building block for breast milk. Good examples of lean proteins include lean meats, poultry, fish, eggs, beans, lentils, nuts, and low-fat dairy products.

Healthy carbohydrates consist of whole grains, fruits, and vegetables. They are the best carbohydrates to include in your diet.

Healthy fats, such as low-mercury fish, flaxseed, walnuts, olive oil, and canola oil, can provide essential fatty acids that aid in your baby's brain and eye development. Unsaturated fats are what many call "healthy" fats and should make up most of your intake. They include both monounsaturated fats and polyunsaturated fats.

Monounsaturated fats support heart health and are found in olive oil, avocados, peanuts, almonds, pumpkins and sesame seeds. Polyunsaturated fats include omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids, which are abundant in many vegetable oils. Omega-3s include salmon, sardines, chia, and walnuts. Omega-6s include soybean, corn, and sunflower oil.

Table 1. Macronutrients

Macronutrient	Amount & Importance
Protein	~65 grams/day. Adequate intake supports postpartum healing, aids in increasing energy, maintains muscle mass, and helps maintain breast milk. Protein consumed also acts as a building block for the protein present in breast milk that is vital for supplying amino acids to the baby.
Carbohydrates	~210 grams/day. Whole-food carbohydrates provide important nutrients, such as fiber and various vitamins and minerals, that sustain energy, aid in digestion, and support overall maternal and infant health.
Fats	30%–35% of total calories consumed should come from fats. The emphasis needs to be on unsaturated fats rather than saturated or trans fats. Fats consumed by the mother directly impact the fats present in breast milk. Diets rich in fats such as omega-3 fatty acids can directly influence the baby's growth and visual development because of the increase in docosahexaenoic acid (DHA) present in breast milk. Other important roles of fat include absorption of various fat-soluble vitamins to maintain steady energy, support cell function, and support cardiovascular health.

Micronutrient Essentials

Micronutrients are vitamins and elements that are essential to the body's growth and health. Choosing foods rich in these nutrients while breastfeeding can benefit your baby's growth (table 2).

Supplements

Breastfeeding increases the body's demand for certain vitamins and minerals, and some moms find that a balanced diet is not enough to meet those demands. That is why many healthcare professionals suggest continuing prenatal or postnatal vitamins while breastfeeding. However, supplementation should always be customized to your specific needs. Always consult with a healthcare professional before beginning any supplement to determine the right type and dose for your needs.

Table 2. Micronutrients

Micronutrient	Amount, Importance & Examples
Calcium	1,000 mg/day. Helps replace calcium withdrawn from the mother's bones while breastfeeding. Examples include dairy, calcium-fortified plant milks, and leafy greens.
Vitamin D	600 IU/day. Helps the body absorb and store calcium in the bones. Examples include dairy and possibly a supplement, especially where there is low sun exposure.
Iron	Breastfeeding need is lower than in pregnancy but still important for building red blood cells (9 mg/day if not anemic). Examples include lean meats, dark-green leafy vegetables, dried fruits, and iron-fortified cereals.
Iodine	290 mcg/day. Supports the baby's brain development. Examples include iodized salt, dairy, and seafood.
B vitamins	Amounts needed vary per vitamin. Examples include fruits, vegetables, lean proteins, dairy, whole grains, and fortified grains/cereals. Vitamin B12 is especially important for vegans and may need to be supplemented into their diet. This vitamin supports the baby's neurological development. Animal proteins and dairy are the only dietary sources for vitamin B12.
Choline	550 mg/day. Important for brain development. Examples include eggs, meat, and beans.

Hydration Needs

While you breastfeed, your body's fluid requirements increase because breast milk is approximately 87 percent water. Aim for approximately 100 ounces, or 12 to 13 cups, of total fluids per day, but do not focus on a number goal to hit. The easiest guide to keep up with water consumption is to drink to thirst and/or have a glass of water each time you nurse or pump. This can help make it more of a routine as part of your day and breastfeeding habits.

Choose water as your main beverage, limiting sugary drinks. Other beverages that are considered a good choice are low-fat milk products or fortified milk alternatives, 100 percent fruit juice, and decaffeinated black coffees or teas.

Limit drinks marketed as "milk supply boosters," as many contain hidden sugars and offer little proven benefit compared to simply staying well-hydrated with water. While products such as drink mixes and certain beverages might be recommended by friends, family, or online groups, there is limited scientific evidence supporting their effectiveness for increasing milk supply. Some drinks also may contain herbal galactagogues, which can negatively interact with certain medications or have unwanted side effects.

Foods to Avoid

Just like during pregnancy, there are foods you may need to avoid. Some foods and drinks have components that can inadvertently pass to babies through breast milk, so it is important to be aware of what you are consuming, how much you have consumed, and when you consumed it.

Following are some foods to avoid or limit:

- Food items high in mercury, such as shark, swordfish, king mackerel, and tile fish
- Excess caffeine (limit to about 300 mg/day or less)
- Excess alcohol. One drink or less is fine, but if you have consumed more than the recommended daily amount for adults, consult with your doctor or your baby's pediatrician for further guidance.
- Ultra-processed foods that are high in added sugars and sodium

Practical Tips for Meeting Nutrient Needs

Breastfeeding a baby is busy work! Between daily schedules, lack of sleep, and feeding your baby, you may find it difficult to fit in time to fuel your own body. Below are practical tips that may help you incorporate those extra nutrients into your day.

- Keep healthy snacks, such as nuts, yogurt, fruit, and whole-grain crackers, in easy reach.
- Pair protein with produce to help steady energy levels, support muscle repair, and improve fullness with meals. Examples are cheese with apple slices, hummus with carrot sticks, and peanut butter on whole-grain toast.
- Use batch cooking or freezer meals to save time during busy weeks.
- Hydrate intentionally. Have a glass of water each time you nurse or pump.
- Aim for a mix of food groups and include a variety of colorful fruits and vegetables each day to help meet vitamin and mineral needs.
- Ask family or friends to help with meal prep or grocery runs so that you can focus on recovery and feeding your baby.

Key Takeaways

- Breastfeeding increases your calorie and nutrient needs. Focus on quality foods, not just more food.
- Include lean proteins, whole grains, fruits, vegetables, and healthy fats each day.
- Hydration matters. Aim for about 100 ounces (12 to 13 cups) of fluids daily, mostly from water.
- Plan ahead and lean on your support system to help you meet needs and feel your best.

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