

## Something Special in a Mother's Breast Milk

Contributed by Dike Onwuamaeze  
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Breast milk is the baby's first best food and aids mental and physical growth

The memory has lingered 14 years after. As she narrated her first experience of breast-feeding in 1997, you can see the unmistakable radiance of happiness and love in her eyes. For her, it was breast-feeding, more than the period of pregnancy and the pains of child birth, that made her feel like a mother. "Suckling my child gave me the initial joy of being a mother," Ugochukwu Mekowulu, an Onitsha-based house wife, told Newswatch recently. Mekowulu, who is today, a mother of five children, practises exclusive breast-feeding because there is something special the mother's breast milk does to babies. "Every child that is fed with breast milk rarely suffers ill health. Also, every breast-fed child grows up to be a wise adult. This is why I exclusively breast-fed all my children for six months and thereafter, supplemented their breast-feeding with other food items suitable for babies for another nine months, she said.

Another mother who derives joy in breast-feeding her baby is Rita Ebochina, a staff of AICO Insurance PLC. "I breast feed my children very well because it is the easiest, simplest and most convenient way to feed a baby. I breast-feed for 22 months because it builds up their immune system so that I do not have to be rushing them to the hospital every now and then," she said. Ralph S. Olarewaju, medical director, Mother and Child Hospital, Ikeja, Lagos, said that breast feeding is the best thing for the child. It is the baby's best food and the only one that is tailor-made for them. It also has many advantages. According to him, it is the first immunisation for the baby, especially the first burst of milk that flows out of the mother's breast. Breast milk is also considered a living milk that contains glucose and other essential minerals in the right proportion for a new born child. Breast milk is equally suitable for the nourishment of premature babies. "There is no way cow milk and other infant formulas can be made to be as good and safe for the child as a mother's breast milk," Olarewaju said. There are two important roles a mother's breast milk plays in the growth of a child. It does not only enable the child to grow physically, it makes the child to grow mentally as well. Medical studies have shown that the first one year of breast feeding is for growth and if you extend it to the second year, it is for brain development. It is recommended that where it is possible, a baby should be breastfed for at least 18 months. That is why the World Health Organisation, WHO, recommended six months of exclusive breast-feeding," Olarewaju told Newswatch. Abimbola Williams, a doctor and member of the Newborn and Child Health Adviser of the Save the Children, a United Kingdom- based non-governmental organisation, said that exclusive breast-feeding means to "breast-feed without alternating it with water, infant formula, herbal medicine or whatever." It is also essential to initiate breast-feeding within the first hours of birth. "Immediately after delivery, the baby should be put to breast, even before the mother is cleaned because that has other effects on the release of the placenta," Williams said. Exclusive breast-feeding for the first six months of life is expected to be followed by the introduction of complementary foods that are safe, appropriate, locally available and nutritionally adequate, with continued breastfeeding for up to two years and beyond. The timing of introduction of complementary foods shall be from six months of life, except otherwise medically indicated. The importance of adequate breast-feeding of a child was emphasised in the national policy of infant and young child feeding in Nigeria that was prepared by the Federal Ministry of Health in 2005. The policy stipulates that the provision of adequate nutrition during infancy and early childhood is a basic requirement for the development and promotion of optimum growth, health and behaviour of the child. The period of birth to two years of age is recognised as a critical period for which adequate nutrition should be provided for the child to achieve optimum development and full potential. The nutrition policy demands that "all public and private places of employment shall be actively encouraged to provide crèches and establish flexible nursing periods during the working hours." However, not every mother is willing or opportuned to practice six months of exclusive breast-feeding. Olamide Olayinka, a banker, is among those who could not carry out the six months exclusive breast-feeding in spite of her willingness to do so. Her job allows her a maximum of three months maternity leave to be with her child. She told Newswatch that she did exclusive breast-feeding for only three months even though she breast-fed for another 12 months. It is a common experience shared by other mothers who work. Breast-feeding is not only good for the child, it is also good for the mother, the family and the society. Breast-feeding helps the mother to regain her body shape after pregnancy by aiding the release of certain chemicals stored in her body. It also reduces loss of blood by the mother as well as enabling the womb to contract and the uterus to quickly assume its normal shape and size. It equally helps to keep the family's budget low. A tin of baby formula, which a baby needs to take at least three in a week, costs as high as N1,000. In a year that family must have spent a minimum of N156,000 to cater for the feeding of the baby whereas the breast milk is without any financial cost. In addition, the breast feeding is beneficial to the society because of the affection it creates between the mother and the child and those around them. "We are what we are today because our parents had time for us, especially breast-feeding. But unfortunately we seem not to have time for our children," Olarewaju said.