THE 25TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE SURGEON GENERAL’S WORKSHOP ON BREASTFEEDING AND HUMAN LACTATION: THE STATUS OF BREASTFEEDING TODAY

Every hour of every day, almost 500 new mothers across the United States face the same decision: how to feed their newborns. A fundamental aspect of the protection and promotion of health is to ensure individuals are able to make informed decisions in supportive environments. We have an ethical responsibility to ensure that mothers are fully aware of the health consequences of their infant feeding decisions. Breast milk is the best source of infant nutrition. When a mother chooses to breastfeed, we also have a responsibility to protect and support her decision by providing an environment that enables her to be successful.

June 2009 marks the 25th anniversary of the Surgeon General’s Workshop on Breastfeeding and Human Lactation, held in Rochester, New York, in 1984. The workshop represented a milestone in efforts to improve maternal and child health, and highlighted breastfeeding as a public health priority. Representatives from major professional and voluntary organizations met to assess the state of breastfeeding and to develop strategies to achieve the 1990 Health Promotion/Disease Prevention breastfeeding objectives.

The benefits of breastfeeding are well-recognized. In 2007, the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) published a summary of systematic reviews and meta-analyses on breastfeeding and maternal and infant health outcomes in developed countries. The benefits of breastfeeding were reaffirmed, including protection against otitis media, gastroenteritis, severe lower respiratory infections, and necrotizing enterocolitis. In addition, the AHRQ report concluded that breastfeeding is associated with lower rates of sudden infant death syndrome, childhood obesity, type 2 diabetes, and leukemia. The maternal health benefits of breastfeeding were also identified, including reduced risk for type 2 diabetes, as well as breast and ovarian cancers.

In light of the important maternal and child health benefits of breastfeeding, health professional organizations, including the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Family Physicians, American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, American College of Nurse-Midwives, American Dietetic Association, and American Public Health Association, among others, officially recommend that most infants breastfeed for at least 12 months. These organizations also recommend that for about the first six months infants be exclusively breastfed, meaning that they not be given any foods or liquids other than breast milk. Today, more than 50 national health professional, educational, and other nonprofit organizations, as well as federal government agencies, participate in the United States Breastfeeding Committee, whose mission is “to improve the nation’s health by working collaboratively to protect, promote, and support breastfeeding.”

Since the Surgeon General’s workshop in 1984, tremendous progress has been made toward better protection, promotion, and support for breastfeeding mothers and children throughout the United States. Whereas 59% of women initiated breastfeeding in 1984, roughly three-quarters of women now start breastfeeding, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s National Immunization Survey.

National initiatives have been implemented to ensure that training for clinicians includes a focus on breastfeeding. Between June 2004 and April 2006,
Breastfeeding is the optimal form of infant nutrition. As public health leaders, it is our responsibility to protect, promote, and support breastfeeding mothers and babies. I urge you to consider ways you can be active in promoting and supporting breastfeeding in your environment, including your workplace and your community. These efforts will support a public health movement that not only provides optimal nutrition to infants, but also lessens the occurrence of infectious and chronic diseases, thereby improving the health of our nation.

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REFERENCES