

April 27, 2009

Program promotes benefits of breast-feeding

New program promotes natural nursing for babies

By Laura Ungar

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Candice Braden cuddled her tiny daughter, caressing her head as the newborn suckled.

Braden said she always planned to breast-feed, but had some difficulties after a cesarean section -- and turned to peer counselor Shannon Perez for help.

"At first, I called Shannon almost every day," said Braden, who is in her early 20s and lives in Louisville. "She's very reassuring, saying that I'm doing a good job."

Both women are part of a breast-feeding initiative that the Women, Infants and Children nutrition program is promoting, in an effort to raise the area's breast-feeding rates.

Officials are pushing the program as WIC makes the first major changes in its approved food lists in nearly 30 years. Those changes, which include adding fresh produce, whole-grain breads and certain baby foods, must be rolled out by October, and breast-feeding mothers will receive the biggest WIC food packages available.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released figures last summer showing that only 48 percent of Kentucky babies born in 2005 were ever breast-fed, the second-lowest rate in the nation, after Louisiana. Indiana did much better at 65 percent, though its rate was lower than the national average of 74 percent.

Those numbers are important because studies show breast-feeding reduces the risk of all sorts of medical problems in babies, such as ear and respiratory tract infections, asthma, diabetes and even certain cancers. And in mothers, it reduces the risk of Type 2 diabetes, breast and ovarian cancers and postpartum depression.

The WIC breast-feeding program, begun almost four years ago, pairs new mothers like Braden with those who have breast-fed and been clients in the nutrition program.

Barbara Ruedel, breast-feeding promotion coordinator for the Louisville Metro Department of Public Health and Wellness, said five peer counselors work part time calling, visiting and educating the 743 clients to keep them breast-feeding. Since its inception, the program has served more than 3,500 women.

"It's a wonderful program. We see so many moms who wouldn't be doing it otherwise," Ruedel said. "We don't have enough people in our society breast-feeding."

That's especially true among lower-income people, such as families receiving federal WIC assistance.

Studies show that well-educated, higher-income mothers are more likely to breast-feed.

A CDC analysis shows that two-thirds of babies born in 2005 to mothers who never graduated from high school had been breast-fed, compared with 86 percent of those whose mothers graduated from college. The percentages were almost identical for families living in poverty, with incomes below \$22,050 for a family of four, versus those with incomes at least 3.5 times the poverty level, or \$77,175 for a family of four.

Brandi Harris, who is in her early 20s and has a son about 11 months old, said she wasn't really interested in breast-feeding until taking childbirth classes and hearing about the benefits.

"I just want to give him more than what I had," said Harris, who was not breast-fed and suffered jaundice and breathing troubles as an infant. "A lot of my family members had discouraged me from breast-feeding. (My peer counselor) encouraged me to continue."

Peer counselors said they help mothers overcome obstacles, such as painful nipples or difficulties getting babies to latch on and feed. When necessary, they call in Ruedel, a lactation consultant and dietitian.

Peer counselor Jenell Wenglikowski, who wore a T-shirt with the words "Shape the Future -- Breastfeed," said she touches base with about 240 women each month.

"Nobody in my family breast-fed. But I always heard it was better," said Wenglikowski, an experienced breast-feeder. "And it frees up a lot of money -- that's another reason to do it."

Abby Huff, a 28-year-old peer counselor, said she relates to the mothers she mentors and is inspired to share what she's learned about keeping babies healthy.

"I wanted moms to know the benefits of breast-feeding," said Huff, a mother of two. "And I want my kids to grow up in a society where it's normal."

Reporter Laura Ungar can be reached at (502) 582-7190.

Additional Facts

Benefits of breast-feeding

For mother

Reduces risk of ovarian, breast and uterine cancer by 30 percent

Quicker weight loss

Decreased risk of postpartum hemorrhaging

Saves money

Increased feelings of closeness with baby

For baby

Decreased risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome

Decreased risk of allergies or asthma

Less risk of diabetes or obesity later in life

Higher scores on IQ tests

Lower cholesterol

Increased presence of antibodies to protect against disease

Fewer doctor visits
Reduced risk of ear and respiratory infections

*Source: U.S. Department
of Health and Human Services*
