

"Breastfeed: It's Too Important Not To"

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Even though 49.6 percent of Alabama mothers breastfed their newborn babies while in the hospital, almost 90 percent of them received a gift pack containing infant formula. These are among the findings of the 2001 Pregnancy Risk Assessment Monitoring System, or PRAMS, survey. In the survey, mothers giving birth in 2001 were asked about their experiences in the hospital after delivery.

The Alabama Department of Public Health and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children, WIC, are promoting this year's theme of: "Breastfeed: It's Too Important Not To."

The PRAMS survey found 87 percent of Alabama hospitals provided mothers giving birth with information about breastfeeding, but only 30 percent of babies were fed only breast milk while in the hospital.

While breastfeeding has been recognized as the optimal method of infant feeding, only about half of Alabama mothers attempted to breastfeed in 2001. The Healthy People 2010 objective is for at least 75 percent of mothers to breastfeed their infants in the first six weeks after birth. Breastfeeding provides benefits to both the mother and infant.

Research studies show that infants who are breastfed are less likely to develop infections and diseases. Breastfed babies have fewer ear infections and respiratory infections. The risks of obesity, childhood cancers, diabetes, allergies and SIDS are less in infants who are breastfed. Also, mothers who breastfeed reduce their risk of developing breast, uterine or ovarian cancer.

About 55 percent of mothers reported that hospital staff helped them to breastfeed. One mother commented on the PRAMS survey, "I know that breastfeeding him probably helped him more than anything else while he was in the hospital. Breastfeeding is the best way."

When comparing 1999 data for all PRAMS states, Alabama had the third lowest breastfeeding initiation rate of 53.1 percent. Louisiana had the lowest rate of breastfeeding (48.0 percent), while Alaska had the highest rate of 89.0 percent. Alabama mothers who were 35 years and older, white, married and with higher educations were more likely to breastfeed their infants.

Data from the Newborn Screening Program were used to calculate 3-year (2000-2002) breastfeeding percentages for Alabama counties. Percentages of breastfeeding prior to hospital

discharge ranged from a high of 66.4 percent in Shelby County, to a low of 12.8 percent in Sumter County. Counties in the northern part of the state had an overall higher prevalence of breastfeeding than counties in southern Alabama.

This information is available in a fact sheet produced by Alabama PRAMS and Alabama WIC. Please contact Rhonda Stephens, PRAMS coordinator, at (334) 206-2689, or Michell Grainger, state lactation coordinator, WIC, at (334) 206-5673, for copies.

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