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## **Breastfeeding is a Building Block for Improving Public Health**

In an effort to increase public awareness and support for breastfeeding, the United States has celebrated National Breastfeeding Month annually in August since 2011. The importance of breastfeeding for improving health outcomes for today's mothers and babies, and future generations as a whole cannot be overstated. With some of the highest maternal and infant death rates among all high income countries, improving breastfeeding rates in the United States is imperative for protecting and improving the health of our population.

Breastfeeding provides several health benefits to both infants and their mothers. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, breastfed babies are less likely to die from Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) and suffer from fewer short-term illnesses such as ear and gastrointestinal infections. Breastfeeding is also vital for protecting infants during emergencies, when access to refrigeration or a safe water source – necessities for formula feeding – may not be guaranteed. Mothers who breastfeed their infants can enjoy long-term health benefits, including a lower risk of breast and ovarian cancers, type 2 diabetes, and high blood pressure. Supporting mothers in breastfeeding their babies is vital to creating a healthier society, starting with our youngest citizens.

Despite the health benefits of breastfeeding, less than 25% of infants in the United States are exclusively breastfed until 6 months old, which is recommended by many health promotion organizations including the World Health Organization and the American Academy of Pediatrics. Community supports can go a long way in helping more families meet their breastfeeding goals. Many women stop breastfeeding sooner than they would like to because they doubt that they are producing enough milk, lack support from family and friends, or return to work and are not offered adequate time or a clean space to pump their breast milk. Additionally, while most people are aware that breastfeeding is beneficial for babies, most mothers are not aware of how breastfeeding benefits their own health. Mothers who breastfeed their babies are at lower risk of breast and ovarian cancer, high blood pressure, and type 2 diabetes.

During National Breastfeeding Month, and in daily life, it is important to consider how to support expecting and nursing mothers in our community. If you know an expecting parent, consider talking with them about their feeding plans and offering your support. If someone you know is already breastfeeding their baby, ask what you can do to support them! In Jackson County, there are also a number of resources available to mothers to help them start and continue to breastfeed. The Jackson County Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program provides free breastfeeding support to pregnant women and breastfeeding mothers enrolled in the program. County residents can apply for WIC by contacting the Jackson WIC office at (517) 788-4484.

Families who do not qualify for WIC have several resources available. The Henry Ford Jackson Hospital outpatient lactation clinic can be reached by calling (517) 205-4940. Visit the La Leche League of Jackson on Facebook at *La Leche League of Jackson Michigan*. The Jackson County Breastfeeding Coalition can be found on Facebook at *Jackson County Breastfeeding Coalition*.

The Jackson County WIC program and the local breastfeeding coalition will again be organizing a Rock & Rest station at the Jackson County fair, from August 6-12. The space will be located at the southern end of the Gumper building, and will offer a rocking chair and changing station to give nursing moms and their families a break from the heat and a chance to nurse privately if they choose. Look for signs posted around the fairgrounds.

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