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Mother's milk

For years, formula has been an easy option for new mothers, but institutional attitudes are changing to encourage breastfeeding among low-income and minority families

BY JASMINE ROCKOW
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Despite being one of the wealthiest nations in the world, the United States is one of the sickest. Obesity is one of the fastest growing chronic conditions both globally and nationally, affecting 15 percent of American adults and 18 percent of American children, according to the Centers for Disease Control. It's a contributing cause to other serious diseases such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease and some types of cancer. And these diseases are killing people at an ever escalating rate. The World Health Organization predicts that diabetes will be the seventh leading cause of death worldwide by 2030.

Chronic disease has become more than a public health crisis in the U.S. It's not just that we are getting sicker, it's also who is getting sick more often and who is dying at disproportionate rates from diseases that we now understand to be preventable. Looked at through this lens, chronic disease is as much about inequality as it is about public health.

One culprit comes in an innocuous — and usually subsidized package: baby formula.

Doria Thiele is a clinical assistant professor at Oregon Health & Science University. Thiele is also a certified nurse midwife studying lactation, the breastfeeding relationship and the role of breast milk.

"Human milk is ideal for human babies and when we introduce other things like formula or foods too early, we can disrupt the metabolic pathways. We have such a crisis with obesity and diabetes and cardiovascular disease in our country. And we know that some of the aspects of formula that babies can be exposed to,

increase their likelihood of developing those diseases," says Thiele.

A 2009 meta-analysis published in *Advances of Experimental Medicine and Biology* indicate that formula feeding does in fact increase a person's likelihood of becoming obese by 20 percent. That isn't surprising, considering that corn syrup is one of the main ingredients in most popular brands of formula.

Public health officials are trying to encourage more women to breastfeed, but convincing some women to ditch formula presents a huge hurdle.

"We need to be really careful because there's a lot of people who can't even meet their own basic needs," says Thiele. Although 90.2 percent of Oregon mothers initiate breastfeeding, only 24 percent manage to continue breastfeeding their babies through 6 months of age. Rates are lower in low-income communities of color, especially for African American women, Latinas and Native American women.

Consequently, illness, disease, and infant mortality rates are higher for these groups than the general population. In the U.S., a woman's ability to nourish and bond with her baby has become an economic privilege denied to a growing number of women who lack the resources of time and money.

Surgeon General Regina Benjamin issued a call to action to support breastfeeding in 2011 and the American Academy of Pediatrics asserts that breastfeeding is a matter of public health, but the United States is one of the only countries in the world where infant formula companies are free to aggressively market their products.

In 1981, the World Health Organization adopted the International Code of Marketing

of Breastmilk Substitutes. As of 2011, 103 countries have enacted some kind of legislation prohibiting the marketing of infant formula to the general public but the U.S. has taken no legislative action on the code.

Formula companies inundate hospital maternity wards with free formula, free branded supplies like diaper bags and even pamphlets on how to properly breastfeed, complete with instructions on how to switch to formula — just in case breastfeeding doesn't work out.

For low-income women, the temptation to formula feed doesn't end at the hospital. The federal Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children, or WIC, is a recognized champion of breastfeeding in Oregon. They offer free lactation support and breastfeeding peer counseling to low-income moms. In addition to those services, federal requirements mandate access to free formula once the baby reaches 1 month of age.

In 2011 the U.S. Department of Agriculture released a study on how WIC's contracts with formula companies impacted the infant formula market. They found that whatever company holds a sole-source contract with WIC also dominates formula sales by an average of 84 percent.

Three of the four formula brands offered by Oregon WIC without medical documentation are made by Similac, which is owned by Abbott Laboratories. Abbott is a global pharmaceutical company with an entire division devoted to diabetes care products.

"The pharmaceutical companies that produce formula are incredibly smart," says Helen Bellanca, Maternal Child Program

Manager at Health Share. "They know how to get their product out there and they know that if a baby starts drinking formula while they are still in the hospital after being born, then it's likely the mom is going to continue to choose that same brand when they go home."

But there has been a resurgence. Encouraged by the surgeon general's call to action and the supportive policies of the AAP, breastfeeding rates are slowly beginning to creep up. Oregon in particular has been a leader in the breastfeeding movement. And advocates say baby-friendly hospitals are one of the most exciting and promising developments for families in Oregon.

The Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative got its start in 1991 by the WHO and UNICEF. It's a global initiative — any hospital in the world can become baby friendly as long as they submit to the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes and the Ten Steps to Successful Breastfeeding. It's a long and often expensive transition for hospitals to make, but proven to dramatically increase breastfeeding rates and other birth-related health outcomes.

Oregon currently has five certified baby friendly hospitals, none of which are in Portland. However, five of the Legacy Health System hospitals in the Portland/Vancouver area are on their way to becoming baby-friendly. They have been implementing the steps over the past three years and hope to

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