Mothers' Stories

Lifesaving Antibodies

The decision to breastfeed was not easy for me. I never really imagined doing it and had no close family members who nursed. But after a lot of reading and conversations with friends about the benefits of breastfeeding, I knew it would be best for my child. While pregnant, I read *The Womanly Art of Breastfeeding* from cover to cover, in anticipation of what I suspected would be a worthwhile challenge. With each chapter, I felt a mixture of anxiety and determination to nurse my son, Lucas. I attended a La Leche League Series Meeting to meet other mothers who were breastfeeding and found their support encouraging.

Upon Lucas' arrival I did not know if I was "doing it right." I asked questions of people in the hospital and some were helpful and others were not. I learned that, ultimately, in those beginning days, it is up to you and your baby to figure out what nature intended.

Once home, my milk came in and new breastfeeding challenges began. I was fortunate to have a close friend, Robyn, an LLL Leader, whom I called each day for the first three days. Robyn offered support and encouragement. I asked whether he was latching on correctly and whether I was making enough milk. I was in a state of uncertainty and felt as though I were feeding around the clock. At the end of each day, I would recommit myself to breastfeeding. I would give myself reminders and encouragement: "Stick with it. It is what is best for him. You can do it."

I had periods when I felt isolated. Friends and family would come to visit us, and I would sit alone in another room breastfeeding. A number of people shared the advantages of bottle feeding with me. Many of them complimented me for what I was doing, but also shared how much "easier" bottle feeding would be. I had moments when I would sit and consider that as an option, but something inside kept driving me to continue.

With each passing day, breastfeeding became more comfortable. It became a time of intimacy—I could stroke my baby's head, talk to him, and relax myself. It served as a way to limit my activity and allow my whole body to heal from the birthing process. Additionally, I began to "shape up" pretty quickly—the baby weight was gone, and that felt great.

Just as I began to feel successful in what I had set out to do, I faced my next challenge: returning to work. I went back when Lucas was 12 weeks of age and was ready with a plan that included pumping and storing. I had introduced a bottle at six weeks, giving him one bottle of breastmilk each week and he took it just fine. I had equipped my car as my private pumping spot with tinted windows, shades, and everything I could possibly need. But, like everything else, there was a learning curve. I honestly hated pumping. The sensation is not the same as nursing and doing it so frequently hurt at first. I could not leave my work mindset and had a hard time having a let-down.

I questioned my ability to continue nursing. I knew many moms who had stopped when returning to work. I would tell myself, "One more day." And then, in a matter of a few weeks, pumping was "normal." It was part of my day, a chance to reflect on the previous hours of my work and to collect my thoughts. It was, in a way, a time to reconnect with myself as a mother and to do something for my child, whom I wanted to be with. I was feeling proud and successful. Beyond my friend Robyn, I did not know any other women who was continuing to nurse her child as I was.
Illness Strikes

Lucas was four months old when my husband and I thought that he had his first cold. We brought him to the doctor on a Tuesday and went home with some cold remedies. By Friday, we felt confident he was not getting better. Something was strange with his breathing at night. We returned to the doctor, somewhat apologetic for being there. I felt like an overanxious new mom. But the nurse agreed that something did not seem right. She tested his oxygen level and it was alarmingly low. Before I knew it, we were in an ambulance on our way to the children's hospital.

We spent over a month in the hospital. Lucas had severe pneumonia. Doctors informed us early on that there was a larger illness at hand and the pneumonia was secondary. Less than 8 hours after being admitted to the hospital, breathing became harder and harder for Lucas. He was intubated and over the next seven days, he was completely sedated and had a machine breathing for him. It was a scary and emotional time for my husband and me, as parents of our first child. We'd never imagined something like this could happen.

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Thanks to the support of Lucas' pediatrician, I decided to express my milk to maintain a supply. Soon after, the doctors at the hospital began feeding Lucas my milk via a feeding tube. Over those scary seven days, my husband and I were with Lucas around the clock and felt completely helpless. Being able to provide him with my milk made me feel that I was doing something for my sick baby during a time when I could do nothing other than sit and watch the doctors and nurses take care of him. He was being pumped with medications left and right, but I knew that he was at least getting something from me each day. Pumping and providing milk helped keep me focused on what I needed to do next, rather than being constantly upset by the reality of the situation.

Thankfully, Lucas was extubated after seven days. The doctors at Wolfson's Children's Hospital in Jacksonville, Florida, were amazing and saved his life. He was breathing on his own and was awake. The recovery was not easy—he suffered withdrawals from the medications he required to stay sedated and did not want to eat upon waking up. He continued to get my milk via a feeding tube. Soon, we began bottle feeding him my milk to see how much he would consume.

For the four weeks we were in the hospital and two weeks after, I pumped every three hours around the clock; I had a new motivation. Lucas had a form of Primary Immune Deficiency. His body was not fighting infection the way it should. Every doctor, resident, and nurse that I interacted with at the hospital told me that breastfeeding was providing him with necessary antibodies that his body did not have and that breastfeeding had protected him from becoming ill much sooner.

Lucas' form of pneumonia, called Pneumocystis pneumonia, is only present in individuals with suppressed immune systems. My breastmilk could not have prevented him getting pneumonia, but it did protect him from many other ailments that he could have encountered. During our stay at the hospital, Lucas was indirectly exposed to chicken pox. With a suppressed immune system, getting chicken pox would have been serious. But, again, doctors said that they felt his risk was lowered because my milk protected him from contracting it. Over and over again, I heard the same thing and each time I became more satisfied with my decision as a new mom and more passionate about breastfeeding.

After a couple of weeks being home, I resumed nursing Lucas and he began to nurse well again. It seemed as though the bond of nursing helped him return to “himself.” In the following weeks we finally got a diagnosis. Lucas has a genetic disorder called “Hyper IGM Syndrome.” There is no history of this syndrome in my family or my husband's family. Currently, Lucas is infection free and, as a family, we have to take steps to keep him that way. We hope that a bone marrow transplant may provide a cure, but we have a long road ahead of us.

I am sharing this experience because I feel strongly that my story provides real evidence of the benefits of breastfeeding. I never imagined that when I decided to breastfeed, I would be as thankful as I am for that decision. I feel strongly that I may have helped to save Lucas’ life. I am still a breastfeeding mom and am more proud of that than almost anything I have done in my life. I hope Lucas’ story will help motivate someone else to commit to breastfeeding. It can save a child's life.

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