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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Date: July 19, 2005

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Breastfeeding still needed when babies start solid food

World Breastfeeding Week, August 1-7

Highlighting the importance of continuing to breastfeed after babies reach six months is the theme of World Breastfeeding Week, Aug. 1–7, 2005.

Breastfeeding is the way most families start out feeding their babies. Physicians around the world recommend that babies need no other food than mother’s milk until they are 6 months old. When babies start solid foods they still need the nutrition and protection afforded by their mother’s milk.

Experts agree that breastfeeding offers babies the right mix of food and immunological protection to help them grow normally. The more breast milk babies get, the stronger and longer lasting these benefits are.

Around six months of age babies have matured enough to begin to need more calories and nutrients than breastfeeding alone can supply. They are more active, are able to sit up and control their head movements and can reach out for food from family members’ plates. By six months, babies can also swallow soft food from a spoon.

According to Bonnie Bruce, RN, IBCLC, a lactation consultant at Ukiah Valley Medical Center, while starting solid foods can be exciting and fun for families, breast milk should continue to be a very important part of the baby’s diet.

“Babies and young children are still vulnerable to infectious diseases that cause diarrhea and ear infections,” Bruce said. “They need the protection of breast milk, especially as they are now crawling around and exploring things with their mouths.”

International Board Certified Lactation Consultants are available to help families with breastfeeding throughout the entire breastfeeding period, Bruce said. “IBCLCs have specialized knowledge of breastfeeding and child development through two years of age and beyond. They can help mothers understand what their babies are going through and work together to find solutions.

“IBCLCs can provide information and assurance when mothers are questioned by others who may not understand the important benefits of breastfeeding an older baby.”

Bruce said we are fortunate to have two IBCLCs in our community — herself and Tess O’Connell, RD, IBCLC, breastfeeding coordinator at WIC.

Parents who think their baby may be ready for solid foods should discuss it with their baby’s health care provider. Studies show that starting solid foods too early can lead to becoming overweight, as well as replace high-quality breast milk with less nutritious foods.

Babies need to receive solid foods with a spoon. Feeding cereals and other foods in a bottle can increase the risk of tooth decay, can cause overfeeding or choking and does not help the baby learn new feeding skills.

Bruce notes that foods first offered should be high in iron and vitamin A. These include iron-fortified cereals, orange fruits and vegetables, and pureed legumes and broth. Use plain or single foods without added salt, sugar or fillers. Avoid commercially prepared desserts or dinners.

Portions should be limited to just 1–2 teaspoons of a single food to introduce the baby to the taste and feel of something new. Parents and caregivers must be slow, patient and responsive to the infant’s signals of hunger or fullness.

When babies are ready for solid foods, parents can use this opportunity to reassess their own eating habits and choose healthier, less-processed foods for the entire family. In this way, they build a solid foundation for good eating habits and healthy lifestyles for themselves and their children.

Mothers who have questions about starting their babies on semi-solid foods in addition to breast milk should contact their health care provider or public health nutritionist.

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