

Do hospitals' freebies undermine breast-feeding?

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In this Sept. 14, 2011 photo, Jessica Ewald breast-feeds her 5-month-old son Bennett at her home in Oakbrook Terrace, Ill. Like many new moms, she got a hospital goody bag with supplies including free formula and formula coupons that she gave away as soon as she got home. Ewald, the daughter of a breast-feeding activist who fought to get those goody bags out of hospitals, says hospitals sending newborns home with formula can really undermine a woman's determination to breast-feed. (AP Photo/M. Spencer Green)

(AP) -- Jessica Ewald brought more than a new baby boy home when she gave birth earlier this year. Like many new moms, she got a hospital goody bag, with supplies including free infant formula and formula coupons.

"We gave it away the moment we came home because I said I'm not having that in our house," Ewald said.

Ewald, 32, of Oakbrook Terrace, Ill., is the daughter of a breast-feeding activist who fought to get those goody bags out of hospitals. Ewald was taught early on that "breast is best," and even though as a teen she rolled her eyes when her mom asked pregnant women about nursing, Ewald knew she'd choose breast over bottle when her own time came.

Borrowing a line from a [blogger](#), Ewald says hospitals sending newborns home with formula "is like giving somebody divorce papers at their wedding." It can really undermine a woman's determination to breast-feed, she said.

The head of the federal [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) shares her concern.

"Hospitals need to greatly improve practices to support mothers who want to breast-feed," Dr. Thomas Frieden said last month in releasing a [CDC](#) report card on breast-feeding. It showed that less than 5 percent of U.S. infants are born in "baby-friendly" hospitals that fully support breast-feeding, and that 1 in 4 infants receive formula within hours of birth.

Routinely offering new moms free formula is among practices the CDC would like to end. In some cases, hospitals agree to give out those freebies in exchange for getting free supplies for special-needs infants, Frieden said.

Exactly how many U.S. hospitals hand out formula is unclear. The American Hospital Association and the International Formula Council, a trade group for formula makers, do not keep statistics and formula companies contacted for this story declined to comment.

A nationwide study of more than 3,000 U.S. hospitals and maternity centers published last year in the Journal of Human Lactation found that 91 percent sent new moms home with free formula in 2006-07. A smaller 2010 study of 1,239 hospitals suggests that the practice has decreased, although most - 72 percent - still offered formula. That study is being released Monday in October's Pediatrics.

"I don't think hospitals are the right place to market anything and I don't think hospitals should be marketing a product that is nutritionally inferior to breast milk," said study author Anne Merewood, an associate pediatrics professor at Boston University medical school and editor of the Journal of Human Lactation.

"People do think if a doctor gives something it must be good for you," Merewood said.

Some women and activists, though, say the move to end formula freebies is part of a breast-feeding movement that has gone too far, overstating the benefits and guilt-tripping new moms who have difficulty nursing or just choose not to. And even some breast-feeding moms don't have a problem with the free formula.

"I think it's fine to offer freebies to any mom, especially those who are undecided or have already made up their mind not to breast-feed. We are always free to refuse," said the Rev. Camille Lebron Powell, an associate Presbyterian pastor in Little Rock, Ark.

Breast milk contains antibodies that strengthen babies' immune systems and help them fight infections. Research has shown that breast-fed babies have reduced chances of becoming obese or developing diabetes in childhood, and sudden infant death syndrome is less common in breast-fed infants.

The American Academy of Pediatrics and other medical groups recommend that infants receive only breast milk for their first six months. The new CDC report shows that only 15 percent of new mothers achieve that goal, and only 44 percent of new moms breast-feed at all for six months.

Lebron Powell doesn't dispute the benefits and chose to breast-feed her children, aged 9 months and 4 years old. But she says those who choose to use formula shouldn't be demonized.

"Breast-feeding is free. It's good for the baby and it's good for the mom. But it's hard and if you work and the employer doesn't support your pumping needs, you are in trouble," she said.

Hospitals have been offering formula freebies for decades, but they have a new incentive to abandon the practice.

The Joint Commission hospital accrediting group last year added "exclusive breast milk feeding" during newborns' hospital stays as a measure that hospitals can be evaluated on. While formula giveaways won't be evaluated, the commission mentions monitoring that practice when it educates hospitals on how to improve their performance, said Celeste Milton, an associate project director at the commission.

The goal is to discourage hospitals from giving infants formula when it's not medically necessary, said commission spokeswoman Elizabeth Zhani.

Central DuPage Hospital in Winfield, Ill., the suburban Chicago hospital where Ewald had her baby last March, boasts that 93 percent of its new mothers are breast-feeding when they're sent home. It also supplies lactation consultants to new moms - a service Ewald said she appreciated. But Ewald said she got a mixed message about breast-

feeding, because nurses there wanted to give her baby formula to help him gain weight, and because of those free samples in her goody bag.

Hospital spokeswoman Amy Jo Steinbruecker said the gift bags contain "literature and samples of common items newborns may need, including a small sample of formula," and are meant to support healthy parenting and baby care.

But she said the hospital is examining the formula freebies as it seeks to be designated "baby-friendly."

The World Health Organization and the United Nations Children's Fund established that designation to encourage breast-feeding, with 10 criteria hospitals must meet. These include allowing new moms and infants to remain together throughout the [hospital](#) stay and not giving [newborns](#) any pacifiers or formula.

Jennifer Smoter, a spokeswoman for Abbott Nutrition, makers of Similac formula, declined to disclose how many hospitals Abbott provides with formula samples and would not comment on the practice. Representatives of Mead Johnson, makers of Enfamil formula, did not respond to several email and telephone requests for comment.

Haley Stevens, a scientific affairs specialist for the International Formula Council trade group, said not offering new moms formula samples "is really irresponsible."

New moms should have formula available, along with information on how to use it so they don't water it down or make other mistakes that could endanger their babies' health, Stevens said.

"We agree [breast-feeding](#) is the best, when you can do it," she said. "There's no question. But if one size doesn't fit all, it's good to have a

backup."

More information:

CDC breast-feeding report:

<http://www.cdc.gov/breastfeeding/data/reportcard.htm>

American Academy of Pediatrics: <http://www.aap.org>

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