

Hospitals stop baby formula gifts

New Parent Kits now will encourage breast-feeding.

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Percent of infants who receive only breast milk while in the hospital:

Clovis Community Hospital: 74.9%

Community Regional Medical Center: 10.2%

Kaiser Permanente Medical Center: 62.2%

Saint Agnes Medical Center: 82.6%

Selma District Hospital: 36.5%

Sierra Kings Hospital: 12.2%

Source: 2006 figures from UC Davis Human Lactation Center and the California WIC Association.

New mothers at four Fresno County hospitals won't be going home with diaper bags filled with free baby formula any longer. The hospitals are replacing formula giveaways with information about breast-feeding and parenting tips to encourage moms to breast feed.

Community Regional Medical Center, Saint Agnes Medical Center, Clovis Community Medical Center and Sierra Kings District Hospital in Reedley will hand out about 17,000 free "New Parent Kits" provided by First 5 Fresno County.

Anything to increase breast-feeding rates is welcome. Only 38.7% of Fresno County newborns are exclusively fed breast milk, according to a December 2007 study by the UC Davis Human Lactation Center and the California WIC Association. New breast-feeding rates are expected to be released in the next couple of weeks.

"We want to move forward with promoting breast feeding," said Susan Alday, director of perinatal services at Sierra Kings. The Reedley hospital has one of the lowest exclusive breast-feeding rates in Fresno County at 12.2%.

Studies show breast-fed babies are healthier, but for years hospitals have given formula as a parting gift to a new mother, regardless of whether the woman intends to breast feed. Only recently has the hospital practice come under fire from lactation experts, who say it sends a mixed message about the importance of breast-feeding versus bottle-feeding. Breast-feeding moms wondered why they were getting a bag containing infant formula, said Suzanne Stipe, supervisor of lactation services and perinatal education at Community Regional Medical Center. The bag was an unintended endorsement of bottle-feeding, she said.

Community Medical Centers, which operates the regional medical center and Clovis Community Medical Center, began investigating an alternative to formula handouts about a year ago, Stipe said. Community Regional Medical Center's rate for newborns exclusively getting breast milk was 10.2% in 2006, the lowest reported for Fresno County.

Stipe said First 5 Fresno County offered the hospital the New Parent Kits that contain information about breast-feeding as well as how to take a baby's temperature, how to find a good baby-sitter and other parenting information. First 5 is one of 58 commissions for the improvement of the lives of children from birth to age 5 that receive money from a 50-cent tax on cigarettes approved by state voters in 1998. The regional medical center gave away its first parent kit last month. Clovis Community began handing out the parent kits a couple of months ago, Stipe said. Saint Agnes and Kings View expect to have kits by September.

First 5 Fresno County welcomes the partnership with hospitals, said Kendra Rogers, deputy director. The New Parent Kit has information inside that is very "meaningful for a parent when they're leaving a hospital," she said.

Dr. Edward Moreno, health officer for Fresno County and a member of the First 5 commission, said the hospitals' decision to swap formula bags for parent kits is a big step toward increasing breast-feeding rates in the county. "New parents have a lot of questions when they take a baby home," he said.

Not sending new mothers home with baby formula does result in more mothers giving their babies breast milk, said Joann Skoflis, a lactation consultant at Kaiser Permanente Medical Center in Fresno.

Kaiser stopped accepting free baby formula five years ago, and breast-feeding rates have gone up since, she said. Kaiser has its own parenting information kits that are given to new mothers.

But Rogers of First 5 said she hopes the New Parent Kits help to promote breast-feeding in the community. The message should be clear to mothers, she said: "When possible, breast-feeding is best for babies."

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