

U.S. breast-feeding rates rise to record high

By Will Dunham *Thu Aug 2, 9:12 PM ET*

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - The percentage of U.S. mothers who breast-feed their babies has reached the highest level on record amid mounting evidence that it provides many health benefits to the child, U.S. officials said on Thursday.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said 74 percent of American women who gave birth in 2004 breast-fed their babies for at least some period of time, continuing an upward trend since the early 1990s.

"We've made quite a bit of progress," CDC epidemiologist Dr. Celeste Philip, lead author of a CDC report on breast-feeding, said in a telephone interview.

Breast-feeding rates just about reached the government's target of 75 percent, the report showed. But many women did not stick exclusively to breast-feeding in the first months after birth as recommended by experts, turning instead to baby formula, the report showed.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that women who do not have health problems exclusively breast-feed their infants for at least the first six months, with breast-feeding continuing at least through the first year as other foods are introduced. The CDC backs these recommendations, Philip said.

The CDC report found that among infants born in 2004, the rate of exclusive breast-feeding through the first three months after birth was 31 percent, shy of the government's goal of 60 percent, and through six months was 11 percent, below the government target of 25 percent.

The report detailed racial and socioeconomic disparities among women who provide their babies exclusively breast milk in these first months, with black, teen-age, rural, less-educated, lower-income and unmarried mothers less likely to do so.

PROGRESS SINCE THE 1970s

Philip said she hoped the new statistics will prompt doctors to renew efforts to persuade mothers to breast-feed their babies. She said the CDC is working with hospitals to encourage support of breast-feeding in the days after birth.

The 2004 breast-feeding rate of 74 percent was the highest since such statistics were first kept for U.S. women in the 1950s, Philip said. The lowest rate on record was in 1971, when only 25 percent of mothers breast-fed their infants amid major cultural shifts occurring in the country.

By 1982, the rate had jumped to 62 percent. But it declined again through the 1980s and slumped to 52 percent in 1990 before increasing to 71 percent in 2000 and continuing to rise into this decade, the CDC said.

The CDC noted that breast-feeding is associated with decreased risk for many diseases and conditions, including ear infections, respiratory tract infections, sudden infant death syndrome, obesity, eczema and diarrhea.

It also is associated with health benefits to women, CDC said, including decreased risk for the most common form of diabetes, ovarian cancer and breast cancer. "Something I think a lot of people may not realize is that there are benefits to the mother as well as the child," Philip said.



[Reuters Photo:](#) A child breast-feeds in an undated photo. The percentage of U.S. mothers who breast-feed their...