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The Establishment of the Microbiome in the Newborn

This is a huge, huge subject with research being done constantly and research articles being published almost every single day. It is fascinating and endless. I will give you just a taste today.

Did you know that we have more bacteria living in and on us than we have human cells? We automatically think, when we hear the word, bacteria, that it must be bad. But, that is not true. The answer to that is we have an estimated 100 trillion “life forms living in and on us”. WOW! So.....where did we get this thing we call a microbiome? Well, we got some of it, believe it or not, before we were born via our placenta. The rest we got initially from our mother’s vagina (aka birth canal), our mother’s skin, our mother’s milk and our mother’s mouth (yes, from her kisses). If

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we got it from our mommies, it must be good or there must be a reason for it, right? Yes. This exposure to these bacteria, starts stimulating our immune systems at a very early age. The good ones certainly protect us right off the bat and the not so good ones signal our bodies to make antibodies or kick in our defenses to fight it off. Incidentally, if our mama is healthy, there will not be too many bad ones present at birth. She will begin protecting us immediately. Omitting or delaying the newborn bath is crucial. Babies are not dirty, can be wiped off so that the protective layer that mama has provided is not removed. Many encourage not actively bathing a new baby for at least a week and then clear water is usually enough. Keeping the diaper area is the only thing that needs cleaning. Keeping a baby skin to skin with mama and daddy for 1-2 weeks also aids in building the skin microbiome. It also creates intensive bonding.

When a baby is born vaginally, the baby is seeded with all the prominent bacteria in the birth canal, primarily, lactobacillus and provotella. If a cesarean section is necessary and the baby has to bypass the usual birth canal bacteria, the baby will have bacteria prominent on the mother's skin and what may be present, in the environment at the time.

Now, let's talk Breastmilk. It is really good stuff. It provides ALIVE, bioactive constituents and constant supply of microbes into the baby's body. It lays down the microbiome of the infant's gut and provides regulatory cytokines and regulatory hormones. Breastmilk contains lysozyme, lactoferrin, oligosaccharides (which support the growth of the microbiota) and enhances the mucosal barrier function. Many believe that breastmilk enhances the formation of the gut-brain

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axis.

The largest question is what, as perinatal health care providers, can we do to promote the most positive newborn microbiome at birth? We can promote vaginal birth (unless truly contraindicated), promote breastfeeding, and encourage breastmilk for every baby. As the research continues and we learn more and more, we will strive to promote the establishment of the healthiest microbiome for every baby born into our care.

Jill F Whitfield, CNM
GPA Board Member

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