

Breast Milk Stimulates Immune System

According to a report in the January 16th issue of the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, a protein present in breast milk has been found to stimulate the immune system in mice and is likely to perform a similar function in people. Researcher Dr. Michael Julius of the Toronto General Research Institute at the University Health Network, Canada, said in news reports that "We know that the immune system is compromised early in life--meaning that infants are more vulnerable to infection,"

"It takes up to a year for an infant's immune system to start to fully function near adult efficiency."

"We have known the benefits breast milk provides to newborns for many decades, (including) growth factors, nutrition, and passive protection or passive immunity to infections. This means that antibodies produced by the mother in response to illness-causing microbes that she has encountered, are passed to the baby in her milk and help protect the baby from the same microbes the baby is very likely to come in contact with,"

Now Julius and colleagues have identified a key protein, called sCD14, that they believe aids early immune system growth in babies. Not only has the group shed light on a major developmental process, but if they are correct--and there are strong indicators that they are, Julius said--the new finding could lead to better baby formulas that more closely approximate mother's milk.