

## Breast-Feeding

(Written for "The Listener" by DR. MURIEL BELL, Nutritionist to the Department of Health)

WE have seen that it is the opinion of those doctors who have the opportunity of watching the progress of infants that a "flying start" is given to a baby if it has the chance of being breast-fed. The Ministry of Health in England has just published a report on this subject. Their investigations indicate that there are 80 per cent of mothers leaving hospital and 95 per cent of those confined at home who are initially able to breast-feed their babies. The difference is ascribed to the over-mechanisation of the hospital, the insistence on routine and the ready tendency to give a baby a supplementary feed, a tendency which gets him into the habit of drinking from a bottle. Arising out of this, they make several recommendations aimed at correcting this tendency. It may be that they are not applicable to our own conditions.

By the end of three months, it was found that the number of breast-fed babies had dropped to 50 per cent. Apparently in Britain the breakdown occurs at about the sixth week, and is due to a variety of causes. Nervous strain is a significant factor; the woman who "takes things easily" usually makes a success of breast-feeding, so the report says; this is physiologically sound.

One might have thought that under wartime conditions the need of women to return to employment would play a large part, but a committee of the British Paediatric Association, reporting on "Breast Feeding in Relation to Female Labour as it Particularly Affects Birmingham," finds that the percentage of women still breast-feeding their babies at the third month has, in fact, increased since the beginning of the war.

The Ministry of Health report paints a picture of the mother with her home difficulties to face—too much housework and worry—resorting too readily to an occasional bottle-feed, and from that to complete bottle-feeding. This, they consider, is one factor in the decline at this period.

In England, 40 per cent are still breast-feeding at the end of six months, a figure slightly higher than our own.

The recommendations include arguments in favour of breast-feeding: that it is cleaner and safer, because it eliminates possible external sources of infection; it is easier; breast-milk is the only food designed by Nature for the human infant; if the baby is fed successfully on the breast, its physical well-being will be conducive to sounder psychological well-being; and most important of all, the risks to the infant's life, especially from infections, are lessened by successful breast-feeding. Note the word "successful"—it would be folly not to substitute a good system of artificial feeding if the lactation were unsuccessful.

The mother's food is also important—but we have dealt with that on a former occasion.



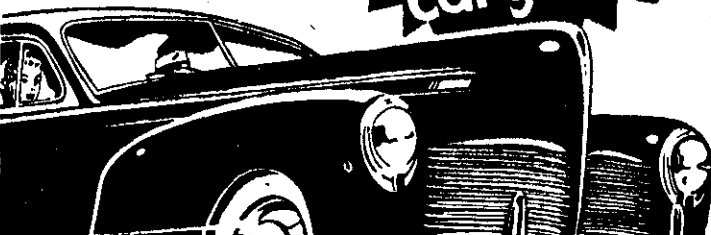
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