

BREASTFEEDING: Healthy Mothers and Healthy Babies



WABA 2002

Breastfeeding is well-recognised and is a means to protect, promote and support the health of infants and young children. Mother's milk fosters optimal growth and development of a baby's brain, immune system, and general physiology and is a vital factor in preventing common illnesses, especially diarrhoea and infections of the respiratory tract (including pneumonia), ear, and urinary tract. The act of breastfeeding releases growth hormones, promotes healthy oral development, and establishes a trusting relationship between baby and mother. Exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months reduces the risk of environment-borne illnesses, malnutrition, food sensitisation and allergy.

Breastfeeding also has definite benefits for mothers. It is a fundamental, physiologic continuation of pregnancy and childbirth. Thus, beginning exclusive breastfeeding shortly after birth lowers the mother's risk for excess post-partum bleeding and anaemia. Once mother and baby have learned to do it easily, breastfeeding can reduce a mother's stress by keeping her infants or young children healthy and well nourished. Exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months saves the mother money, energy, and time: nothing to buy, prepare, or clean up. Exclusive breastfeeding* can also boost a mother's own immune system, help delay a new pregnancy, and reduce the insulin needs of diabetic mothers. In the long term, breastfeeding can help protect a mother from breast and ovarian cancers and brittle bones.

Too often, a mother's needs and wants go unrecognised or unsupported. Her physical and emotional health, her level of education, the help she receives from others, and her household economics influence her breastfeeding practices and other aspects of caring for her children. In particular, a woman's pregnancy and childbirth experience can greatly impact the way breastfeeding begins and continues.

This year, World Breastfeeding Week seeks to underscore the urgent need to protect, promote, and support the health and well-being of mothers as well as to protect, promote, and support the health and well-being of babies, through breastfeeding. The Goals for WBW 2002 are:

- To reinstate breastfeeding as an integral part of women's reproductive cycle and health.
- To create awareness of women's right to humane and non-invasive birthing practices.
- To promote the Global Initiative for Mother Support (GIMS) for Breastfeeding as one way to strengthen the support for mothers.

Healthy Mothers

Health is internationally accepted as a fundamental human right. Women and girls' right to health of the highest attainable standard includes the right to full and reliable medical information; to informed consent, choice and decision-making in health care, reproduction and infant feeding; to privacy and confidentiality; and to safe conditions of work and environment. These rights are reiterated in numerous national and international documents, beginning with the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)*.

* Exclusive breastfeeding means that no other drink or food is given to the infant; the infant should breastfeed frequently as it demands and for unrestricted periods.