

# Breastfeeding and Family Foods: Loving & Healthy

**Feeding other foods while breastfeeding is continued**



## A CARING TRANSITION

For the very best start in life, the World Health Organisation (WHO), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and health agencies worldwide recommend that mothers breastfeed their babies exclusively for the first six months, and continue breastfeeding together with giving other foods and drinks, up to two years or more, as long as mother and baby want to<sup>13</sup>.

The theme of this year's World Breastfeeding Week (WBW) is continued breastfeeding and giving other foods after six months of age. These foods need to be high in nutrients, the right consistency and appropriately fed. We consider how to make the transition from exclusive breastfeeding, to breastfeeding and eating with the rest of the family, in a way that is loving and caring.

# WABA 2005

## COMPLEMENTARY FEEDING USING FAMILY FOODS

**A**t six months of age, children need other foods in addition to breastmilk to meet their nutritional needs. The term used for giving other foods and drinks in addition to breastfeeding is 'Complementary feeding'. The foods given should 'complement' – make complete – the energy and nutrients provided by breastmilk.

The theme 'Breastfeeding and family foods' was chosen because in most households around the world, older babies (6-12 months) and young children are fed with the same foods that are eaten by the rest of the family. This is not meant to imply that at 6 months babies can move directly from exclusive breastfeeding to eating exactly the same meals as the rest of the family. Older babies and young children need to be given the most nutritious 'best bits' of the family's food, appropriately prepared (mashed, chopped, softened etc) to suit the child's eating abilities.

Starting to eat other foods marks a new phase in the social, emotional and behavioural development of older breastfed babies, particularly as people other than their mothers may become involved in feeding. Complementary feeding also provides opportunities to develop communication, hand-to-eye coordination and motor skills and may lay the foundation of responses to food choice that persist well beyond infancy. When carried out with love, care and patience, starting to feed other foods can be a time for extending and strengthening the mother-baby bond of breastfeeding, not ending it.



## CONTINUED BREASTFEEDING

Breastfeeding continues to be important for children's nutrition, development and care after the first 6 months of life. On average, breastfed babies of 6-8 months obtain around 70% of their energy needs from breastmilk, this falls to around 55% at 9-11 months, and 40% at 12-23 months<sup>7</sup>. Breastmilk is also a major provider of protein, vitamins, minerals, essential fatty acids and protective factors. It provides more calories and nutrients per ml than most of the other foods, and much more than the soft cereals, baby rice or pureed vegetables that are typically some of the first foods given to older babies. If babies' stomachs are filled with nutritionally poor foods, they will take less breastmilk and their overall diet and health will be inferior. The contribution of breastmilk is often overlooked in the enthusiasm to get complementary feeding started. The challenge is how to feed other foods so that they add to the nutritional contribution of breastmilk, rather than replace it (see box A on page 2).

