

WHY BREASTMILK CONTINUES TO BE AN IDEAL FOOD FOR INFANTS AND YOUNG CHILDREN OVER 6 MONTHS OF AGE

- ❖ **Breastmilk is a high quality food.** Breastmilk is a nutrient-rich and energy-rich food, which is easy to digest. Breastmilk contains factors that help with the absorption of nutrients.
- ❖ **Babies who continue to breastfeed will never go hungry.** Demand-fed breastfed babies regulate their own food intake; when they are hungry they root, cry or reach to be breastfed. When unrestricted breastfeeding continues together with feeding other foods, babies are still in control of how much they eat. If they don't like a particular food, or the food offered is insufficient, they can take more breastmilk.
- ❖ **Breastmilk provides protective factors.** The anti-infective factors in breastmilk provide protection against illnesses and reduce the severity of those that occur. This protection continues to be helpful after 6 months because feeding other foods and drinks can expose older babies to more infections and food-borne pathogens at a time when the infant's own immune system is still maturing. Some protection is provided even if breastfeeding declines to a few breastfeeds a day.

❖ **Breastfeeding helps recovery from illness.** Sick babies often do not feel like eating foods, but they usually want to breastfeed.

Mothers can respond to bouts of illness with nourishing, comforting and therapeutic breastmilk. Growth factors in breastmilk hasten repair of the intestines after diarrhoea. (If breastfed babies are so sick that they don't want to suckle, they need to be taken to a health centre immediately.)

❖ **Special mother-baby relationship continues.**

Breastfeeding provides emotional nurturing for mothers and babies that is valuable and enjoyable well beyond 6 months.



Feeding is the families responsibility. It is good for fathers to be involved.

GLOSSARY

COMPLEMENTARY FEEDING: giving other foods and drinks in addition to breastmilk. 'Complementary feeding' is intended to replace the term 'weaning' because 'weaning' can be interpreted as stopping breastfeeding, as well as introducing solid foods. 'Complementary feeding' gives a clearer signal that the foods and liquids are given to 'complement', not replace on-going breastfeeding.

FAMILY FOODS: any foods typically consumed by family members

OLDER BABY: baby aged 6 to 12 months

MICRONUTRIENTS: vitamins and minerals

NUTRIENT DENSE: provides a lot of nutrients in a small volume of food/drink

STAPLE: main element of household's diet e.g. rice, maize, wheat, plantain, potato.

TODDLER: young child who has learnt to walk

YOUNG CHILD: child aged 6 months to around 2-3 years.

FROM EXCLUSIVE BREASTFEEDING TO FAMILY FOODS - A CARING TRANSITION

WHO and UNICEF recommend that complementary feeding should be Timely, Nutritionally Adequate, Safe and Responsively Fed¹³.

TIMELY. When to begin?

Exclusive breastfeeding is more than sufficient to meet the nutritional needs of most babies until they reach 6 months of age (26 weeks). Around this time, several milestones in babies' development come together producing a readiness to eat soft and semi-solid foods. They can usually sit-up, control their heads and move food around their mouths. Their digestive and immune systems have also become more mature.



NUTRITIONALLY ADEQUATE. What foods to give?

Between 6-24 months children grow rapidly and their energy, vitamin and mineral requirements increase, but their stomachs are still relatively small (30ml/kg body weight - about the size of a cup). Throughout this period, children need highly nutritious foods, which provide a lot of nutrients in a small quantity of food (nutrient-dense foods).

SAFE. Preparing & feeding hygienically

Giving breastfed babies other foods at 6 months exposes them to a new source of potential infection and young children are particularly vulnerable to diarrhoea and gastrointestinal infections at this age. Most diarrhoea episodes in children are due to food-borne contamination⁴. Good food hygiene practices are essential when feeding young children.

References cited in the text are both listed on page 6 under "Network & Resources" and below it.