

What every family and community has  
a right to know about

# Breast feeding



## **Note to communicators**

Babies fed on breastmilk have fewer illnesses and less malnutrition than babies who are bottle-fed on other foods. If all babies were exclusively breastfed for about the first six months of life, then the deaths of more than 1 million infants a year would be prevented.

Bottle-feeding is a special threat in poor communities where parents may not be able to afford sufficient milk-powder, may not have clean water to mix it with, and may not be able to sterilize teats and feeding bottles.

The six prime messages in this chapter can help to avert that threat and promote the healthy growth of young children.

Many mothers lack confidence in their own ability to breastfeed. They need the encouragement and practical support of fathers, health workers, relatives and friends, women's groups, the mass media, trade unions and employers.

# Breastfeeding Prime Messages

- 1** Breastmilk alone is the best possible food and drink for a baby. No other food or drink is needed for about the first six months of life.
- 2** Babies should start to breastfeed as soon as possible after birth. Virtually every mother can breastfeed her baby.
- 3** Breastfeeding causes more milk to be produced. A baby needs to suck frequently at the breast so that enough breastmilk is produced to meet the baby's needs.
- 4** Breastfeeding helps to protect babies and young children against dangerous diseases. Bottle-feeding can lead to serious illness and death.

**5** A variety of additional foods is necessary when a child is about six months old, but breastfeeding should continue well into the second year of a child's life and for longer if possible.

**6** Breastfeeding gives a mother 98% protection against pregnancy for six months after giving birth - *if* her baby breastfeeds frequently, day and night, *if* the baby is not regularly given other food and drink, and *if* the mother's periods have not returned.



# Breastfeeding Supporting Information



## 1

**Breastmilk alone is the best possible food and drink for a baby. No other food or drink is needed for about the first six months of life.**

- From the moment of birth up to the age of about six months, breastmilk is all the food and drink a baby needs. It is the best food a child will ever have. All substitutes, including cow's milk, infant formula, milk-powder solutions, and cereal gruels, are inferior.
- Even in hot, dry climates, breastmilk contains sufficient water for a young baby's needs. Additional water or sugary drinks are not needed to quench the baby's thirst. They can also be harmful. If the baby is also given water, or drinks made with water, then the risk of getting diarrhoea and other illnesses increases.
- Other foods and drinks are necessary when a baby reaches the age of about six months. If monthly weighing shows that a child under six months of age is not growing well, then the child may need more frequent breastfeeding. If the child is already being breastfed frequently, then lack of weight gain shows either that the child has an illness or that other foods, in addition to breastmilk, are now necessary.
- Until the age of nine or ten months, the baby should be breastfed before other foods are given. Breastfeeding should continue well into the second year of life - and for longer if possible.

## 2

**Babies should start to breastfeed as soon as possible after birth. Virtually every mother can breastfeed her baby.**

- Mothers and newborn babies should not be in different rooms. The baby should be allowed to suck at the breast as often as he or she wants.
- If a mother gives birth in a maternity unit, then she has a right to expect that her newborn baby will be kept near her in the same room,

24 hours a day, and that no other food or drink will be given to her baby except breastmilk.

○ Starting to breastfeed immediately after birth stimulates the production of breastmilk. Breastfeeding should begin not later than one hour after the delivery of the baby.

○ The thick yellowish milk (called colostrum) that the mother produces in the first few days after birth is good for babies. It is nutritious and helps to protect them against common infections. The baby does not need any other food or drink while waiting for the mother's milk to 'come in'. In some countries, mothers are advised not to feed this colostrum to their babies. This advice is wrong.

○ Many mothers need help when they begin to breastfeed, especially if the baby is their first. An experienced and sympathetic adviser, such as a woman who has successfully breastfed, can help a mother avoid or solve many common problems.

○ The position of the baby on the breast is very important. A bad sucking position is the cause of problems such as:

- sore or cracked nipples
- not enough milk
- refusal to feed.

○ Signs that the baby is in a good position for breastfeeding are:

- the baby's whole body is turned towards the mother
- the baby takes long, deep sucks
- the baby is relaxed and happy
- the mother does not feel nipple pain.

○ Almost all mothers can produce enough milk if:

- the baby takes the breast into his or her mouth in a good position
- the baby sucks as often, and for as long, as he or she wants, including during the night.

○ Crying is not a sign that a baby needs artificial feeds. It normally means that the baby needs to be held and cuddled more. Some babies need to suck the breast simply for comfort. If the baby is hungry, more sucking will produce more breastmilk.

○ Mothers who are not confident that they have enough breastmilk often give their babies other food or drink in the first few months of life. But this means that the baby sucks at the breast less often. So less breastmilk is produced. To stop this happening, mothers need to be reassured that they can feed their young babies properly with *breastmilk alone*. They need the encouragement and practical support of their families, the child's father, neighbours, friends, health workers and women's organizations.

○ Mothers employed outside the home need adequate maternity leave, breastfeeding breaks during the working day, and crèches where their babies can be looked after at the workplace. So employers and trade unions also have a part to play in supporting breastfeeding.

○ Husbands, families, and communities can help to protect the health of both mothers and babies by making sure that the mother has enough food and by helping with her many tiring tasks.

○ Breastfeeding can be an opportunity for a mother to take a few minutes of much-needed rest. Husbands or other family members can help by encouraging the mother to lie down, in peace and quiet, while she breastfeeds her baby.

### 3

**Breastfeeding causes more milk to be produced. A baby needs to suck frequently at the breast so that enough breastmilk is produced to meet the baby's needs.**

○ From birth, the baby should breastfeed whenever he or she wants to—often indicated by crying. Frequent sucking at the breast is necessary to stimulate the production of more breastmilk.

○ Frequent sucking helps to stop the breasts from becoming swollen and painful.

○ 'Topping up' breastmilk feeds with milk-powder solutions, infant formulas, cow's milk, water, or other drinks, reduces the amount of milk the baby takes from the breast. This leads to less breastmilk being produced. The use of a bottle to give other drinks can cause the baby to stop breastfeeding completely. It can also confuse the baby because the sucking action of bottle-feeding is very different from sucking at the breast. Babies who are confused between sucking at the breast and sucking at the bottle may drink less breastmilk. This will cause less breastmilk to be produced.

### 4

**Breastfeeding helps to protect babies and young children against dangerous diseases. Bottle-feeding can lead to serious illness and death.**

○ Breastmilk is the baby's first 'immunization'. It helps to protect the baby against diarrhoea, coughs and colds, and other common illnesses. The protection is greatest when breastmilk alone is given to the baby for about the first six months.

- Cow's milk, infant formulas, milk-powder solutions, maize gruel and other infant foods do not give babies any special protection against diarrhoea, coughs and colds, and other diseases.
- Bottle-feeding can cause illnesses such as diarrhoea unless the water is boiled and the bottle and teats are sterilized in boiling water before each feed. The more often a child is ill, the more likely it is that he or she will become malnourished. That is why, in a community without clean drinking water, a bottle-fed baby is many times more likely to die of diarrhoea than a baby fed exclusively on breastmilk for about the first six months.
- Mothers should be helped to breastfeed their babies. If for any reason a mother does not breastfeed, then she should be helped in other ways to give her baby good nutrition and protection against disease.
- The best food for a baby who, for whatever reason, cannot be breastfed, is milk squeezed from the mother's breast. It should be given in a cup that has been very well cleaned. Cups are safer than bottles and teats because they are easier to keep clean.
- The best food for any baby whose own mother's milk is not available is the breastmilk of another mother.
- If non-human milk has to be used, it should be given from a clean cup rather than a bottle. Milk-powder solutions should be prepared using water that has been boiled and then cooled.
- Cow's milk, infant formula, or milk-powder solutions can cause poor growth if too much water is added in order to make them go further.
- Cow's milk and milk-powder solutions go bad if left to stand at room temperature for a few hours. Breastmilk can be stored for at least eight hours at room temperature without going bad.
- In low-income communities, the cost of cow's milk or powdered milk, plus bottles, teats, and the fuel for boiling water, can be as much as 25-50% of a family's income.

## 5

**A variety of additional foods is necessary when a child is about six months old, but breastfeeding should continue well into the second year of a child's life and for longer if possible.**

- Although children need additional foods after about the first six months of life, breastmilk is still an important source of energy and protein, and other nutrients such as vitamin A, and helps to protect against disease during the child's second year of life.

○ A mother can continue to breastfeed her child for as long as she wishes, but it is best for her own and her children's health if she avoids becoming pregnant again until her youngest child has reached the age of two years. Most methods of avoiding pregnancy - including condoms, IUDs, and voluntary sterilization - do not affect breastfeeding. 'Minipills' and injectable contraceptives also have no effect on breastmilk providing that they contain no oestrogen. But conventional contraceptive pills can reduce the amount of breastmilk.

○ Babies get ill frequently as they learn to crawl, walk, and play. A child who is ill needs breastmilk. It provides a nutritious, easily digestible food when the child loses appetite for other foods.

○ Between the ages of one and two, a baby benefits from breastmilk as well as needing family foods. Breastfeeding is good for the child as part of a meal, or between meals, or whenever the child feels hungry. But at this time, all children need other foods. In the second year of life, breastfeeding should be an addition to, not a substitute for, normal meals.

○ Breastfeeding also comforts a child when he or she is frightened, hurt, angry, or tearful.

## 6

**Breastfeeding gives a mother 98% protection against pregnancy for six months after giving birth - *if her baby breastfeeds frequently, day and night, if the baby is not regularly given other food and drink, and if the mother's periods have not returned.***

○ It is now known that the sucking of the baby on the mother's breast causes a delay in the return of the mother's fertility. For some women, breastfeeding delays the return of menstrual periods for up to 12 months - or even longer. For other mothers, menstrual periods return only three or four months after giving birth.

○ How often the baby sucks at the mother's breast is the most important fact in deciding how long it will be before the mother's periods return.

If a baby sucks very frequently at the breast (whenever the baby wants to, including at night) then the return of the mother's periods will be delayed for much longer. But if breastfeeding is restricted to a regular routine, then the mother's periods will return much more quickly. Or if a mother gives other food or drink to a baby who is less than six months old, then the baby may suck less often at the breast and the mother's periods are likely to return much sooner.

○ The return of menstrual periods lets the mother know that she can become pregnant again.

○ It is possible for a mother to become pregnant again before her monthly period returns. This becomes more likely when six months have

passed since the birth of the baby. A woman who wants to be protected against another pregnancy should choose another method of family planning if *any* of the following apply:

- her baby has reached the age of six months
- her monthly periods have returned
- the baby is starting to take other food and drink in addition to breastmilk.
- Whether or not a mother intends to breastfeed a newborn child, parents should be provided with advice on family planning at the maternity unit or hospital where their child has been born. If the child is born at home, trained birth attendants can also give advice on family planning.