essential information: what every mother must know

The World Health Organization/UNICEF International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes and subsequent relevant Resolutions say every mother is entitled to be fully and acurately informed when deciding how to feed her baby.

According to the International Code (Article 4.2), information and educational materials dealing with the feeding of infants intended to reach pregnant women and new mothers must contain clear information on all the following points:

The risks of feeding infants breastmilk substitutes. Infants fed breastmilk substitutes are at an increased risk of developing infectious illnesses such as gastroenteritis, respiratory diseases, childhood cancers, juvenile diabetes, allergies and Crohn's disease.

How to prepare for and continue breastfeeding. Offer accurate and supportive breastfeeding information. Provide phone numbers of breastfeeding support organizations, including local breastfeeding clinics, La Leche League leaders, certified lactation consultants and public health departments.

It is difficult to reverse the decision not to breastfeed. Mothers need to know that it is easier to switch from breastfeeding to artificial feeding than the other way around. Also, once artificial feeding has caused damage, it is hard or impossible to reverse it. Mothers also need to know about nipple confusion.

The importance of introducing complementary foods at the age of six months. Mothers should know that the early introduction of solid foods could compromise the health of their babies and that breastmilk is all a baby needs for the first six months. They also should know that babies do not often sleep for longer periods of time if they are given solids before bedtime. Babies have small stomachs and need to be fed frequently.

Complementary foods can be easily and inexpensively prepared at home. Mothers can be taught that some foods are easy to use for introducing solids to babies. Use examples like mashed ripe bananas and avocados, and potatoes. Steaming fruits or vegetables and then mashing them with a fork can also be an appropriate way to make baby food. Making simple meat soups will provide soft meats that can be pureed. Use available, nutritious foods that are normally eaten by the family.

Public health nurses, La Leche League leaders and certified lactation consultants can be good sources of information and support and can provide more information on all of these points.

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