



Exclusive Breastfeeding

Improving infant and young child feeding

"...exclusive breastfeeding for six months as a global public health recommendation...and to provide safe and appropriate complementary foods, with continued breastfeeding to two years and beyond."

World Health Assembly Resolution 54.2, May 2001

The best possible infant feeding practices are of fundamental importance to growth, development and health outcomes of infants and children. This not only has important consequences for child health but can also have considerable implications for life. To decide how long infants should be breastfed, the World Health Organization (WHO) reviewed all the scientific research available on infant nutrition, health, growth and development and determined that the optimal duration of exclusive breastfeeding is six months. Breastmilk was determined to be the only nutrition, immunology and fluids that a baby needs.

By means of thorough examination of all the scientific literature, the WHO review determined:

Exclusive breastfeeding for six months instead of four months:

- Protects against gastrointestinal infections.
- Supports normal growth for infants.
- Protects against early subsequent pregnancies.
- Improves return to pre-pregnancy weight for mothers.
- Protects against illness and death due to diarrhoeal disease.

Kramer MS, Kakuma R. The Optimal Duration of Exclusive Breastfeeding: A Systematic Review. Department of Nutrition for Health and Development. World Health Organization, 2002

In Canada, exclusive breastfeeding rates are improving but they still fall far short of the recommended six months for the best possible health outcomes for babies. In addition, hospitals need to reduce the needless supplementation still practiced in many maternity centres.

When complementary foods are introduced too early:

- There is no growth advantage for the majority of infants.
- There is a displacement of highly nutritious breastmilk with less nutritious foods.
- There is interference with the bioavailability of key nutrients such as zinc and iron.
- There is a reduction in the amount of breastmilk a mother produces.
- There is a reduction in the duration of breastfeeding.
- There is a greater risk of illness and death related to respiratory and gastrointestinal infections.
- There is a reduction in the post-natal time of infertility for the mother.
- There is an increased risk of allergies, asthma and atopic disease.
- Baby gets less long chain breastmilk fats for brain and visual development.

Exclusive breastfeeding means that an infant receives only breastmilk. An exclusively breastfed baby should not receive infant formulas, milks, cereal, jarred baby foods or any other foods, fluids, teas or juices for the first six months of life.

Do infants need additional water?

Breastmilk contains all the water a baby needs, even in the hottest summer weather. Exclusive breastfeeding keeps infants in a well-hydrated state and prevents diarrhoeal disease that can lead to dehydration. Breastmilk is 88 per cent water and so quenches a baby's thirst as well as a baby's hunger. A baby's stomach is small and filling it with water or juices leaves no room for the highly nutritious breastmilk that is needed for baby's rapid growth and development. If a baby seems thirsty, then breastfeeding will satisfy the thirst. As well, the more a baby breastfeeds, the more milk (and water) a baby receives.

How to practice exclusive breastfeeding

1. Initiate breastfeeding within one hour after birth.
 - When baby's sucking reflex is strong and baby is in an alert state.
 - This stimulates breastmilk production and the colostrum provides baby with immediate immunization.
2. Establish good positioning and attachment.
3. Use no bottles or pacifiers. If a mother misses a feeding she can express her milk and the expressed milk can be fed by cup.
4. Breastfeed frequently, on-demand, day and night.
5. Nutritious, mashed home-prepared foods can be started at six months.
 - Use ripe, soft, mashed foods such as bananas, yams and sweet potatoes.
 - Meat foods (such as chopped, scrapped beef, stewed meats, tender chicken) will provide important iron.
 - Egg yolks also provides a concentrated source of iron. These can be hard boiled and mashed.
 - Breads and cereals, including toast and whole grain cereals cooked with water, provide carbohydrates.
 - Fresh fruits such as apples, pears, peaches and melons can be peeled mashed, stewed or grated. Avoid dried or canned fruits.
 - Vegetables such as potatoes, carrots, green leafy vegetables, husked peas or beans, can be cooked, mashed or grated.
 - Dairy products such as yoghurt, cottage cheese and natural cheeses can be added at 9 to 10 months. Small amounts of butter and non-hydrogenated vegetable oils can also be started at this time.
6. Breastfeeding should be continued with complementary foods until the baby is at least two years of age.

"No one could give her such soothing and sensible consolation as this little three month-old creature when he lay at her breast and she felt the movement of his lips and the snuffling of his tiny nose."

L. Tolstoy, "War and Peace: Epilogue Part I, Chapter 11