

Breastfeeding key to saving children's lives

Ten steps to successful breastfeeding highlighted during World Breastfeeding Week

30 JULY 2010 | GENEVA -- During World Breastfeeding Week, celebrated from 1 to 7 August in more than 170 countries, WHO reiterates its call on health facilities and health workers to implement ten steps to help mothers breastfeed successfully and improve their babies' health and chances of survival.

Breast milk is the ideal food for newborns and infants. It is safe, gives babies the nutrients they need for healthy development and contains antibodies that help protect infants from common childhood illnesses. While exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of life is on the rise in many countries, further improvement of breastfeeding rates is critical to improve the nutrition and the health of infants and children. For a variety of reasons, including the lack of breastfeeding counselling, still too many mothers stop exclusive breastfeeding within a few weeks after delivery.

Breastfeeding can save lives

"It is estimated that around 35% of infants aged 0 to 6 months are exclusively breastfed in the world today," says Dr Elizabeth Mason, Director of WHO's Department of Maternal, Newborn, Child and Adolescent Health and Development. "But if all babies and young children were breastfed exclusively for their first six months of life and then given nutritious complementary food with continued breastfeeding up to two years of age, the lives of an additional 1.5 million children under five would be saved every year."

Ten steps to successful breastfeeding

The "Ten steps to successful breastfeeding" were developed by WHO and UNICEF to ensure maternity services are providing the right start for every infant and the necessary support for mothers to breastfeed. Today this check-list is used by hospitals in more than 150 countries.

The ten steps for health facilities to take towards ensuring successful breastfeeding are as follows:

1. Have a written breastfeeding policy that is routinely communicated to all health care staff.
2. Train all health care staff in the skills necessary to implement this policy.
3. Inform all pregnant women about the benefits and management of breastfeeding.
4. Help mothers initiate breastfeeding within half an hour of birth.
5. Show mothers how to breastfeed and how to maintain lactation even if they should be separated from their infants.
6. Give newborn infants no food or drink other than breast milk unless medically indicated.
7. Practise "rooming in" – allowing mothers and infants to remain together – 24 hours a day.
8. Encourage breastfeeding on demand – whenever the baby is hungry.
9. Give no artificial teats or pacifiers (also called dummies or soothers) to breastfeeding infants.
10. Foster the establishment of breastfeeding support groups and refer mothers to them on discharge from the hospital or clinic.

Risk of malnutrition

Malnutrition is responsible for one-third of the 8.8 million deaths annually among children under five. It can be a direct cause of death but is also the most important single risk factor for disease in young children. Over two thirds of these deaths, which are often associated with inappropriate feeding practices such as bottle-feeding or untimely and inadequate complementary foods, occur during the first months of life.

"Increasing breastfeeding rates is a key component of the plan to improve infant and young child nutrition," says Randa Saadeh, Coordinator of the Nutrition in the Life Course unit at WHO. "A renewed effort to make more hospitals 'baby friendly' has the potential to give millions more babies a healthy start in life."

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