

## Breast milk: The Nectar of Life

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### Introduction:

Breast milk is one of the unique sources of food for babies that is naturally available at any time and is cost effective too. It contains all necessary nutrients that promotes infant's health, growth and development and cannot be replaced by any other food. Besides, its many benefits, breast feeding develops a strong emotional bond between the mother and the infant. Every woman, irrespective of region, religion, caste or occupational status, is likely to breast feed her baby. The period of breast feeding is the most critical period of each individual's life in terms of his growth and development.

Breast feeding is the ultimate child survival and development intervention that protects babies from common infectious diseases and boosts children's immune systems, providing the key nutrients children need to grow and develop to their full potential. It has been concluded from researches that babies who are not breastfed are 14 times more likely to die before they reach their first birthday than babies who are exclusively breastfed.

Looking into its importance and benefits rising out of this practice, breastfeeding has been promoted by governments in different countries including India. As per directions of WHO and UNICEF, The World Breastfeeding Week is observed during the first week of August every year, i.e. from 1st to 7th August. The week-long event aims to raise awareness about the importance of breastfeeding for infant development. Thus, it is important for the workplaces to be family friendly, giving breastfeeding breaks for women, making arrangements for separate rooms where mothers can breastfeed or express milk. By providing these kind of support services, there will be reduction in maternity-related absenteeism, increase in retention of female workers.

### **Guidelines given by WHO and UNICEF for new mothers:**

- Mothers should initiate breastfeeding within one hour of birth
- Mothers should exclusively breastfeed the child for the first 6 months
- The child should be introduced to safe

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foods at 6 months with continued breastfeeding up to 2 years of age or beyond.

**Benefits of Breast feeding:** Among many benefits, a few important benefits are listed below:

- Breast milk includes important nutrients (vitamins, minerals, etc), antibodies and enzymes that help to strengthen the baby's immune system and protect them from infections and illnesses. Thus breast fed babies develop strong immunity against infections and diseases.
- It lowers the baby's risk of developing ailments such as respiratory infections, gastrointestinal problems, etc.
- Breastfeeding helps the mother lose postpartum weight, reduces the incidence of breast and ovarian cancer and promotes faster uterine contraction and recovery
- Colostrum, a thick yellowish milk that is produced just after birth, is the ideal nourishment for a newborn and is full of nutrients and rich in antibodies. It is also the baby's first vaccine. Women should be encouraged to provide this first milk to the infants compulsorily.
- Breastfeeding helps to prevent malnutrition in all forms and ensures food security for children.

➤ Besides the benefit to mother and child, breastfeeding benefits the family and society. Breast milk is a natural, renewable, and sustainable resource which does not create waste or pollution. Also if we see in terms of economics, no money is involved as compared to the formula milk powder which has to be purchased.

➤ Breastfeeding is associated with improvement in brain or cognitive development of infants which means a better IQ of the child. It is critical for a child's growth and development

Thus, early initiation of breastfeeding within one hour of birth, exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months, the introduction of nutritionally adequate and safe complementary foods at six months together with continued breastfeeding up to 2 years of age or beyond offer a powerful line of defense against infection and malnutrition. In contrast, children who are not entirely or partially breastfed have a higher risk of diarrhoea and other infections, are more likely to suffer from malnutrition and have an increased risk of death in their infancy.

In most of the cases, lack of knowledge, cultural practices of feeding other food to newborns, and less quality of care provided to mothers and newborns are some of the factors that contributes to the lack of early

breastfeeding initiation after birth. Recent statistics shows the proportion of exclusively breast fed infants have increased from 66.7% during NFHS-4 to 70.4% during NFHS-5 in the country. Also in smaller states like in Meghalaya, only 42% children less than 3 years of age are exclusively breastfed for the first six months (39.2 % in rural areas). This means that more percentage of mothers give powdered milk or some other things to the infants within six months of their age. Also more percentage of children under 5 years are underweight and have low height as according to their age. Since malnutrition hampers children's development severely, if women are given extensive awareness and encouraged, through campaigns in rural and urban areas of the state, about feeding only breast milk till the first six months of the age, it could decrease the burden of malnourished children and thus produce well fed children who will perform better cognitively.

### References:

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