

East or West, Breast Milk is the Best

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Malnutrition is responsible for half the fifteen million deaths happening annually among children under-five children. Two-thirds of these deaths are due to poor feeding practices during the first year of life. Only 35% infants worldwide are exclusively breastfed during the first six months of life.

Though breastfeeding is universal in India, it is not exclusive and is ineffective. Due to improper breastfeeding practices, the breast milk production loss is estimated to be three million litres, largely due to artificial feeding and supplementation of other foods with breastfeeding. Indian culture is in a transitional period, and the institution of family is under threat of disintegration. With increasing urbanization, there is a dislocation of the joint family system which has weakened the mechanism of traditional social support. This, coupled with extensive and pervasive marketing by the baby food industries and not so helpful health care system, is responsible for erosion of breastfeeding practices.

Breastfeeding contributes to healthy growth and psychosocial development of both mother and child. The health and nutritional status of mothers and children are intimately linked. Improved infant and young child feeding begins with ensuring the health and nutritional status of women in their own right through all stages of life and families. Mother and infants form a biological and social unit. They also share problems of malnutrition and ill health, hence the health and nutrition of one group can't be divorced from that of the other. Though breastfeeding is natural it is learned behaviour. Virtually all mothers can breastfeed, provided they have adequate information and support of

their families, communities and the health care system.

Exclusive breastfeeding is unequivocally the preferred method of infant feeding for the first 6 months of life. The American Dietetic Association (ADA) and the American Academy of Paediatrics (AAP) have issued position statements in support of breastfeeding. Numerous national health promotion strategies support breastfeeding. In the early 1980s, up to 62% of infants were discharged from the hospital with mothers who were breastfeeding. However, this declined in the 1990s to approximately 50%. Then in 2000s they slightly increased up to 55%. Effects to promote the practices and duration of breastfeeding need to be strengthened in hospitals, health maintenance organizations, private physician's offices and public health clinics.

The World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) have adapted the Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiative (BFHI), a global effort to increase the incidence and duration of breastfeeding. To become "Baby Friendly" a hospital must agree to implement the *Ten Steps to Successful Breastfeeding* which suggest guidelines for mother and infant management in the hospital. The guidelines include training hospital staff in breastfeeding education and prohibiting supplementing bottles of formula for breastfeeding infants, unless medically indicated.

Every woman should be provided with clear, constant, consistent information that colostrum — the yellowish sticky breast milk produced at the end of pregnancy — is the perfect food for the newborn and feeding should be initiated within half hour after delivery. Exclusive breastfeeding is recommended up to six months of age and

allowed by the introduction of complementary home-made food along with breastfeeding up to 2 years of age and beyond. Prelacteal feeds (like honey, sugar water etc.) are strictly prohibited because not only do they introduce infections but they also replace colostrum and interfere with suckling. If the baby is passing urine 6 times in 24 hrs and gaining weight at rate of 125gm per week, it is an indication that breast milk is adequate. These messages should reach women through all channels of communication. ■

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Ten steps to successful breastfeeding

- Have a written breastfeeding policy that is routinely communicated to all health care staff.
- Train all health care staff in the skills necessary to implement this policy.
- Inform all pregnant females about the benefits and management of breastfeeding.
- Help the mother initiate breastfeeding within a half hour of birth.
- Show mothers how to breastfeed and how to maintain lactation, even if they are separated from their infants.
- Give newborn infants no food or drink other than breast milk, unless medically indicated.
- Practice rooming-in; allow mothers and infants to remain together 24-hours a day.
- Encourage breastfeeding on demand.
- Give no artificial teats or pacifiers to breastfeeding infants.
- Foster the establishment of breastfeeding support groups and refer mothers to train on discharge from the hospital or clinic.