

# The benefits of breastfeeding

The promotion of breastfeeding should be a continuous process, not an event restricted to a week

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UNICEF states that “breastfeeding is among the most effective ways to protect maternal and child health and promote healthy growth and optimal development in early childhood.” Infants should be breastfed within one hour of birth, breastfed exclusively for the first six months of their lives, and be breastfed after six months in combination with solid, semi-solid and soft food until they are about two years old.

## Many advantages

Breastfeeding provides greater immunity for children against infection, allergies, cancers and obesity; and improves brain maturation. It is also beneficial for the mother: it promotes faster weight loss after birth, reduces postpartum bleeding, and protects her against breast cancer, ovarian cancer, and osteoporosis. Data from *The Lancet* show that more investment in breastfeeding could add \$300 billion to the global economy and prevent about 8,20,000 child deaths every year.

The advantages of breast milk are evidence-based, yet globally only 25%-40% of babies are breastfed. Breastfeeding and later wet nursing were the norm for millions of years. During the Renaissance period, breastfeeding came to be seen as unfashionable. Feeding bottles and formula milk were aggressively advertised leading to a reduction in breastfeeding between the 17th and 19th century. However, during the late 19th century, an increase in infant mortality rate and rise in non-communicable diseases during adulthood were attributed to bottle feeding. This prompted experts and leaders everywhere to push for breastfeeding across the world.

The World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action (WABA) was established in 1991 to create awareness about the importance of breastfeeding. In 1992, WABA in coordination with UNICEF introduced World Breastfeeding Week during the first week of August every year. India enacted the Infant Milk Substitutes, Feeding Bottles and Infant Foods Act in 1992 with stringent regulations. However, the National Family Health Survey-5 data

show that there has been a decline in early breastfeeding in as many as 12 of the 22 surveyed States and Union Territories while the share of institutional births has increased.

## Maternity and paternity leave

The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) has promised in its manifesto that maternity leave in Tamil Nadu would be extended to 12 months. This is essential as women are entering the workforce in large numbers while society has shifted to a nuclear family system. Such a move will ensure uninterrupted breastfeeding. Nevertheless, counselling and educating the parents, establishing breast milk banks, providing lactating mothers with subsidised breast milk pump equipment, and setting up exclusive facilities to breastfeed will prove to be beneficial for mothers to provide exclusive breastmilk for children up to six months.

The inclusion of husbands in this conversation is incumbent. Both the mother and newborn are vulnerable for the first 12 weeks. Getting used to breastfeeding takes at least 14 days. Therefore, assistance from the partner is indispensable during this time. However, Indian law only allows for 15 days of paternity leave. It is imperative to extend this to 12-16 weeks.

India is a low-middle-income country with a meagre allocation of the GDP towards health. Communicable and non-communicable diseases hamper our economic growth. The theme for World Breastfeeding Week this year is ‘Protect Breastfeeding: A Shared Responsibility’. With a change in social, cultural and environmental factors, breastfeeding is no longer mother-centric. Governments must allocate specific funds, rigorously implement the law, invest in educating parents and health workers and involve civil society organisations and the media in spreading awareness. Breastfeeding has decreased during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, it is important that the promotion of breastfeeding should be a continuous process, not an event restricted to a week.

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