



Family Digest 43

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World Breastfeeding Week

World Breastfeeding Week (WBW) is observed every year in over 120 countries from 1st to 7th August. It is the greatest outreach vehicle for the breastfeeding movement and seeks to generate awareness among new parents and to enhance the health of infants worldwide. The awareness programme was initiated in August 1990 by governments as well as specialised United Nations agencies, particularly the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), to encourage breastfeeding and in so doing improve the health of mothers and babies. World Breastfeeding Week is marked each year with a particular theme. This year's theme is "Protect Breastfeeding: A Shared Responsibility".¹ The focus is on how breastfeeding contributes to the survival, health and wellbeing of all and why it is imperative to protect breastfeeding worldwide.

UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore and WHO Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus write that "initiation of breastfeeding within the first hour of birth, followed by exclusive breastfeeding for six months and continued breastfeeding for up to two years or beyond, offer a powerful line of defence against all forms of child malnutrition, including wasting and obesity. Breastfeeding also acts as babies' first vaccine, protecting them against many common childhood illnesses."² Breastfeeding plays an important role in the first thousand days of a child's life. In a country where food security for children is not guaranteed and stunting is common, breastfeeding is an essential contribution to the long term wellbeing of the child.

Between the 1930s and 1970s, breastfeeding rates in developed countries declined by 52%, caused in large part by aggressive advertising and promotion of breast milk substitutes. Companies selling formula used aggressive marketing tactics to make new mothers and health-care workers switch from exclusive breastfeeding to breast milk substitutes by marketing these as 'modern' alternatives and donating them to health-care workers and new mothers. In less developed countries with lack of access to clean water, misinterpretation of labels and dosing instructions, and particularly formula affordability, often resulted in improper preparation and storage of breast milk substitutes and contributed to increased infant mortality from malnutrition, pneumonia and diarrhoea.³ Moreover, the promotion of these brands was interfering in breastfeeding programmes in hospitals. Globally, it was noticed that powdered milk formula had a negative impact on the health of children and something needed to be done.⁴

In response to these aggressive marketing tactics, and taking into account the damage caused by these largely unnecessary products, the WHO started campaigning against baby formula and other baby foods being promoted in the market. In August 1990 government policymakers, WHO, UNICEF and other organisations got together and signed the 'Innocenti Declaration', which aimed to protect, promote and support breastfeeding.⁵ Since 2016, World Breastfeeding Week has been aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In 2018, a World Health Assembly resolution endorsed

World Breastfeeding Week as an important breastfeeding promotion strategy.⁶ This would include an ongoing focus on maternal health, poverty reduction and food security.

The International Code of Marketing of Breast Milk Substitutes has been established to protect mothers from aggressive and inappropriate marketing practices by the baby food industry, which is fully implemented by governments, health workers and industry. The Code bans all forms of promotion of breast-milk substitutes, including advertising, gifts to health workers and distribution of free samples. Labels cannot make nutritional and health claims or include images that idealize infant formula. Instead, labels must carry messages about the superiority of breastfeeding over formula and the risks of not breastfeeding.⁷

Both the WHO and UNICEF have encouraged women to continue to breastfeed during the COVID-19 pandemic, regardless of their possible positive or confirmed positive status. While researchers have continued to test breast milk from mothers with confirmed or suspected COVID-19, current evidence indicates that it is unlikely that COVID-19 would be transmitted through breastfeeding or by giving breast milk that has been expressed by a mother who is confirmed or suspected to have COVID-19. The numerous benefits of breastfeeding substantially outweigh the potential risks of illness associated with the virus, and it is not safer to give infant formula milk.⁸

The links below discuss this important issue in more detail.

<https://swachhindia.ndtv.com/world-breastfeeding-week-2021-all-you-need-to-know-61389/>

<https://www.paho.org/en/campaigns/world-breastfeeding-week-campaign-2021>

<https://www.unicef.org/indonesia/press-releases/world-breastfeeding-week-2021-greater-support-needed-breastfeeding-mothers-indonesia>

<https://www.unicef.org/media/69641/file/Marketing-of-breast-milk-substitutes-status-report-2020.pdf>

https://www.who.int/nutrition/publications/infantfeeding/code_report2018.pdf?ua=1

<https://www.healthline.com/health/breastfeeding/extended-breastfeeding#definition>

<https://chemonics.com/blog/three-ways-to-combat-aggressive-marketing-of-breast-milk-substitutes/>

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¹ <https://www.awarenessdays.com/awareness-days-calendar/world-breastfeeding-week-2021/>

² <https://ehealth.eletsonline.com/2021/08/world-breastfeeding-week-2021-breastfeeding-is-babies-first-vaccine>

³ <https://chemonics.com/blog/three-ways-to-combat-aggressive-marketing-of-breast-milk-substitutes/>

⁴ In 1974, a report entitled 'The Baby Killer' accused Nestlé for causing illness and infant deaths in poor communities in third world countries by promoting their infant formula products at the expense of breastfeeding

⁵ <http://worldbreastfeedingweek.org/2018/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/1990-Innocenti-Declaration.pdf>

⁶ <https://swachhindia.ndtv.com/world-breastfeeding-week-2021-all-you-need-to-know-61389/>

⁷ https://www.who.int/nutrition/publications/code_english.pdf

⁸ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/pregnancy-breastfeeding.html>