

BENEFITS OF BREASTFEEDING TO MOTHERS, BABIES, FAMILIES AND NATIONS BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER THE COVID 19 PANDEMIC

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The world breastfeeding week (WBW) is an annual celebration which is held every year from 1 to 7 August and is observed in more than 120 countries around the world. The week was first celebrated in 1992 by the [World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action](#) in collaboration with WHO and UNICEF. The purpose of the celebration was to re-establish a global breastfeeding culture, provide support and promote exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of an infants' life. It is estimated that increased breastfeeding would prevent about 820 000 child deaths around the world.

The 2020 world breastfeeding week is celebrated under the theme "support breastfeeding for a healthier planet". It is essential to acknowledge that all mothers have the right to decide about the choice of nutrition for their babies, therefore, information about breastfeeding must be provided to women to make an informed choice. It is a midwives' ethical and professional responsibility to ensure that women are provided with sufficient, factual, clear and individualised information about breastfeeding from the antenatal period. Exclusive breastfeeding is regarded as the best source of nutrition for the first 6 months of life for all infants. With breastfeeding having benefits into the 2nd year of life and beyond. Furthermore, breastfeeding is considered as the child's best start to life. Moreover, breastfeeding is also vital in early childhood development leading to a greater cognitive ability and contributing to better learning outcomes.

In 2015, the United Nations introduced [17 sustainable development goals](#) (SDG's) to be met by 2030. [The 3rd sustainable development goal](#) on ensuring the health and wellbeing encourages governments and ministries to support and promote breastfeeding as a nutritional intervention for reducing under-five mortality. More importantly, [WHO developed a breastfeeding policy](#) brief to increase attention, investment and actions for cost effective interventions and policies to help member states and their partners to promote and improve exclusive breastfeeding rates among infants up to 6 months. In support, the International Confederation of Midwives (ICM) [position statement on breastfeeding](#) recommends and urges member associations to work with national and international organisations to promote and support breastfeeding, encourage breastfeeding if the mother and baby are on Antiretroviral Therapy and encourage midwives to educate other health professionals on the importance of breastfeeding. ICM also supports the [WHO code on the marketing of breastmilk](#) substitutes

(baby formula) which prohibits the promotion, marketing and inducements for health professionals and hospitals to provide baby milk formula.

Midwives have a critical role to facilitate the immediate and uninterrupted skin-to-skin contact of mother and her baby and also to support the mother to initiate breastfeeding as soon as the baby is born. Every mother and child benefits from optimal breastfeeding irrespective of any circumstance. Breastfeeding reduces the risk of ovarian cancer and breast cancer in the mother, it prevents the emergence of childhood anaemia, increases the mental development of the child and provides a close emotional and psychological contact with baby and mother. This early bonding develops the child's ability to form strong healthy connections to others throughout its life. Most importantly, breast milk contains all the nutrients to meet the baby's' needs — breast milk protects against respiratory and gastro-intestinal infections, breastmilk is easy for the child to digest and reduces the risk of allergies. Thus in order to achieve progress on the global exclusive breastfeeding goals, health care systems should integrate breastfeeding promotion and support throughout the prenatal and postpartum periods.

Although there is ever-growing evidence about the advantages of breastfeeding, the global breastfeeding rates have not significantly increased. High income countries were found to have low rates of exclusively breastfed babies. Whereas in the middle and low-income countries, exclusive breastfeeding rates were found to be high and specifically, poor women often breastfeed their babies for an extended period of time. Many women are encouraged to provide their babies formula milk by the temptations of free samples and common misconceptions that it is better for babies. Many do not realise that this will harm their own supply of breastmilk until it is too late. Most women can breastfeed with support to establish breastfeeding in the early weeks and ongoing.

As many countries in the world are battling to combat the current COVID-19 pandemic, babies are still being born, they require to be fed, and therefore as midwives, we must continue promoting and giving support to breastfeeding mothers. In addition, mothers with suspected or confirmed COVID-19 positive can safely breastfeed their babies with appropriate hygiene precautions. In fact, when women are informed, empowered and supported to breastfeed, the benefit is extended to their children, themselves, their family and the society as a whole. [According to WHO](#), babies should not be separated from their mothers after birth and mothers should be supported to breastfeed regardless of a confirmed COVID-19 status. There is currently no evidence of transmission to infants through breastmilk.

It is therefore important that governments and ministries increase funding and awareness to raise breastfeeding rates immediately from birth up to two years. Furthermore, healthcare facilities must ensure the full implementation of the ten steps to baby-friendly hospital

initiatives for promoting successful breastfeeding. The private sectors can help support and empower women to breastfeed after birth and within the workplace through supportive parental and maternal leave policies including the provision of appropriate work spaces for breastfeeding or expressing of breast milk. Civil society and the general communities can support by taking the lead and supporting efforts to help raise awareness around the benefits of early and exclusive breastfeeding and also help generate the demand among women, families and communities. Midwives and midwifery associations must support by conveying enthusiasm and providing women-specific breastfeeding information and help build the mothers' self-confidence! "While breastfeeding may not seem the right choice for every parent, it is the best choice for every baby". *Breastfeeding is indeed a mother's gift to herself, her baby and the earth* ~ Pamela K. Wiggins

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