

Fourth WHO-Coordinated Survey of Human Milk for Persistent Organic Pollutants in Cooperation with UNEP

THE VALUE OF BREASTFEEDING¹

Breastfeeding is normally the best way to feed infants; its benefits go far beyond sound nutrition, and children should not needlessly be deprived of it.

Nutrition: Breast milk provides, in an easily digested form, all the nutrients an infant needs for the first six months of life. Breast-milk nutrients that other feeds may not provide include:

- high-quality protein
- long-chain polyunsaturated fatty acids, considered essential for the infant's developing brain and eyes
- micronutrients, including iron, in a form in which they are efficiently absorbed
- other factors necessary for optimal growth and protection against infection.

Immunity: From the moment of birth, breast milk actively protects infants against infection. It contains numerous anti-infective factors, including immunoglobulins and white blood cells, as well as growth factors that stimulate the development of the infant's gut. Studies show consistently that, even with optimal hygiene, the rate of diarrhoeal disease of artificially fed infants is several times that of breastfed infants; they also have higher rates of respiratory, ear and other infections. A study in a situation of poor hygiene found that the risk of death from diarrhoea in artificially fed infants was 14 times that of fully breastfed infants. Even in developed countries non-breastfed children have higher rates of diarrhoea. Some chronic diseases in later life, such as adult-onset diabetes, are also increased by lack of breastfeeding.

Up to 6 months of life, breast milk alone provides all the fluids and nutrients that a child needs. Exclusive breastfeeding (i.e., no other food or drinks given, not even water) for the first six months offers maximum protection to infants against pneumonia, diarrhoea and other common infections of childhood.

Up to 2 years of age or more, breast milk continues to provide high-quality nutrients and helps protect against infection. From 6 to 12 months, breast milk usually provides 60–80% of all energy, protein and other nutritional requirements – e.g., vitamins and other micronutrients, and from 12 to 23 months, breastfeeding can provide up to 35–40% of these requirements.

¹ The National Coordinator may simplify this information depending on the needs and educational status of women involved in the survey.

Family planning/child spacing: Breastfeeding delays the return of a woman's fertility. A woman who does not breastfeed is at increased risk of becoming pregnant again as early as six weeks after the birth of the child. All women, especially women who do not breastfeed, should have access to contraceptives within six weeks of delivery, if they so desire, to ensure the recommended interval between births. (A woman who exclusively, or nearly exclusively, breastfeeds during the first six months, and who remains amenorrhoeic [her menses, or periods, have not returned], has less than a 2% risk of becoming pregnant.)

Psychosocial development: Breastfeeding promotes the emotional relationship, or bonding, between mother and child.