



## STRONGER WITH BREASTMILK ONLY

no water until 6 months  
for a healthier baby

# Breastmilk, the Only Source of Water and Food Babies Need for the First Six Months of Life

Healthy newborns enter the world well hydrated and remain so if they are breastfed exclusively, meaning they receive breastmilk only, on demand (day and night), from the moment of birth and for the first six months of life, even in the hottest and driest climates.

Despite this, infants are given water during the first six months of life in many parts of the world, including in West and Central Africa. This has an impact on infant nutrition, health and survival and limits the prosperity of families, communities and nations.

By investing in early childhood nutrition, including early initiation of and exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of life, countries can enrich human capital through improved intellectual and physical health, reaping some of the highest returns in the development field.

This fact sheet shares information on:

- Why exclusive breastfeeding (meaning giving babies breastmilk only on demand, day and night, no water, other liquids or foods in the first six months of life) is important.
- Common reasons for giving infants water (and other liquids and foods).
- Risks of giving infants water (and other liquids and foods).
- What can be done to protect, promote and support exclusive breastfeeding.

## FACT 1

**WHO AND UNICEF RECOMMEND THAT ALL INFANTS BE EXCLUSIVELY BREASTFED FOR THE FIRST SIX MONTHS OF LIFE BASED ON SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE**

Exclusive breastfeeding means that infants receive only breastmilk, on demand (day and night) from the moment of birth and for the first six months of life. No other liquids or foods should be given – no herbal preparations or animal milk, not even water. The only exception is if a health care provider prescribes oral rehydration solution or drops/syrups of vitamins, minerals or medicines.

Giving only breastmilk from the moment of birth and for the first six months of life has many benefits.

### Short term benefits for infant and mother:

- Contributes to infant survival.
- Stimulates the bond between mother and baby and protects against stress.
- Facilitates maternal recovery after childbirth and reduces long-term risks of ovarian and breast cancers and overweight.
- Delays the return of the menstrual cycle, thus helping with birth spacing.

### Ongoing benefits for physical and mental health:

- Strengthens babies' physical, emotional and intellectual developmental and health.
- Protects against infections. Overwhelming

evidence shows that breastfeeding protects against pneumonia and diarrhoea, the two leading killers of children under five.

- Improving breastfeeding could prevent nearly half of all diarrhoea episodes and a third of all respiratory infections.
- Enhances child survival and health. Meeting the global exclusive breastfeeding target by 2025 could save the lives of 520,000 children under the age of five.

**Long term economic benefits for families, communities and nations:**

- Improves learning and productive capacity by building a nation’s human capital or ‘grey matter infrastructure’.
- Boosts income and prosperity. Meeting global targets could potentially generate US\$300 billion in economic gains over 10 years as a result of reduced illness and health care costs and increased productivity.
- Great return on investment. An analysis by the World Bank found that every dollar invested in supporting breastfeeding generates US\$35 in economic returns.

**FACT 2**

**GIVING BABIES WATER IN THE FIRST SIX MONTHS OF LIFE IS A COMMON PRACTICE IN WEST AND CENTRAL AFRICA**

**In West and Central Africa**

OUT OF EVERY 10 BREASTFED BABIES AGED UNDER SIX MONTHS, SEVEN RECEIVE LIQUIDS AND FOODS

MOST OF THE SEVEN ARE GIVEN WATER



The reasons for giving infants water at birth and throughout the first six months of life are multiple, and often deeply rooted in beliefs passed on from generation to generation. In communities living in hot and dry climates, giving water may be the norm. Water is believed to be necessary for life and a practice that is expected across all strata of society. Non-compliance with the norm raises genuine fears for the infant’s survival and can provoke undesirable sanctions from family members.

**FACT 3**

**GIVING WATER (AND OTHER LIQUIDS AND FOODS) IN THE FIRST SIX MONTHS OF LIFE HAS HARMFUL CONSEQUENCES FOR THE INFANT**

**Giving babies water increases the risk of malnutrition.** Replacing breastmilk with a fluid of little or no nutritional value has a negative impact on an infant’s nutritional status, survival and growth.

- Even small amounts of water or other liquids can fill an infant’s stomach and reduce the infant’s appetite for nutrient-rich breastmilk, as well as diminish mother’s milk production.
- Studies in resource-poor setting have associated non-exclusive breastfeeding with poorer growth outcomes because breastmilk is replaced by less nutritious liquids and foods.
- Babies’ stomachs are not equipped to digest foods.

**Giving babies water increases the risk of illness.** Water can be contaminated and utensils used can carry germs.

- Infants who are not exclusively breastfed are at greater risk of exposure to diarrhoea and respiratory infection, especially in environments with poor hygiene and sanitation.
- Diarrhoea and other gastro-intestinal infections may lead to severe nutrition depletion.

**Giving babies water can hinder brain development by depriving it of benefits of breastmilk.**

- The human brain develops fastest between conception and age 2-3 and requires the best nutrition for optimal mental development.
- Young brains are most sensitive to nutrition and other environmental influences, so diminishing nutritional intake can undermine brain health.

**Giving babies water leads to the perception of ‘not enough breastmilk’ and starts a cycle of poor milk production.**

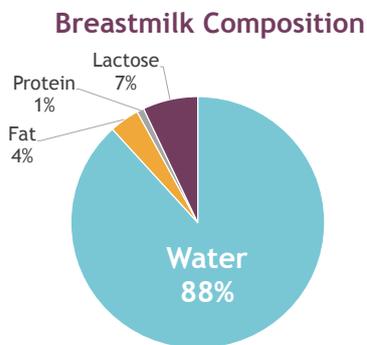
- Perceptions of inadequate breastmilk are an important barrier to exclusive breastfeeding.
- When mothers nurse their babies less, less milk is produced, giving the impression that they ‘don’t have enough breastmilk,’ leading to supplementation, which reinforces the cycle of diminished breastmilk production.

## FACT 4

### BREASTMILK ALREADY CONTAINS ALL THE WATER BABIES NEED IN THE FIRST SIX MONTHS OF LIFE

**Infants' water requirements.** The average daily fluid requirement for healthy infants ranges from 80-100 ml/kg in the first week of life to 140-160 ml/kg between 3-6 months (depending on temperature, humidity and the infant's weight and level of activity). These amounts are available from breastmilk alone, if only breastmilk is given, on-demand (day and night) because of the high water content of breastmilk.

**Breastmilk is 88 per cent water.** When provided on demand (day and night), breastmilk meets the water requirements for infants aged under six months. Even at birth, when newborns receive colostrum, the thicker, yellowish first milk, no additional water is necessary because a newborn is born with extra water.



Source: Lawrence R. *Breastfeeding: A guide for Medical Profession*, 1994.

Breastmilk doesn't require water to 'cleanse' the digestive system. Breastmilk has a perfect chemical balance already. It is low in solutes, which are substances that may be present older children on mixed diets and require 'cleansing' with extra water. Because breastmilk is low in solutes, the infant does not need water to maintain a healthy, balanced body chemistry.

## FACT 5

### EVEN BABIES WHO LIVE IN VERY HOT AND DRY CLIMATES DO NOT NEED EXTRA WATER

Water in breastmilk exceeds the infant's water requirements in normal conditions and is adequate for breastfed infants in hot and dry climates.

- Studies indicate that healthy infants who receive breastmilk only on demand (day and night) in the first six months of life do not require additional fluids to stay well-hydrated, regardless of climate.
- Research in multiple countries found babies living in high temperature, low humidity conditions who were given breastmilk only had solute levels in the urine and blood of within normal ranges, indicating adequate water intake.

## FACT 6

### BABIES WHO ARE SICK WITH DIARRHOEA SHOULD BE BREASTFED MORE

Integrated Management of Childhood Illness (IMCI) guidelines recommended that **mothers increase the frequency of breastfeeding when their infants suffer from mild diarrhoea**. If diarrhoea is moderate to severe, caregivers should immediately consult a health worker while continuing to breastfeed. Infants that appear dehydrated may require Oral Rehydration Therapy (ORT), which should only be given upon advice of a health worker.

Giving water to babies suffering from diarrhoea is dangerous and may worsen their diarrhoea.

## FACT 7

### IT IS POSSIBLE TO STOP GIVING WATER TO BABIES IN THE FIRST SIX MONTHS OF LIFE

UNICEF estimates that if giving water was stopped in the first six months of life, almost all countries in West and Central Africa would achieve the global exclusive breastfeeding target of 50 per cent by 2025.

To stop the practice of giving infants water in the first six months of life, leaders must invest in evidence-informed policies and scalable programmes that protect, promote and support exclusive breastfeeding.

- ✓ **Policy makers** can enact and enforce regulations that protect breastfeeding, including the prevention of marketing of bottled water for babies.
- ✓ **Programme managers** can provide training that strengthens health care worker counselling skills.
- ✓ **Health system managers** can improve systems to ensure quality breastfeeding counselling is provided at multiple service points.
- ✓ **Implementers** can incite social change by engaging communities in participatory, evidence-informed social and behavioural change communication activities that are developed with mothers, their families and community members.
- ✓ **Initiatives** can foster ownership of the *Stronger With Breastmilk Only* campaign by using community dialogue approaches to facilitate commitment to change and by mobilizing key influencers to spread exclusive breastfeeding values and support.

## FACT 8

### **BABIES WHO ARE OLDER THAN SIX MONTHS SHOULD CONTINUE TO BE BREASTFED WHILE BEING INTRODUCED TO COMPLEMENTARY FOODS PROGRESSIVELY**

**Babies benefit from continued breastfeeding up to 24 months of age.**

At six months of age, infants need soft foods in addition to breastmilk to meet their increased nutrient requirements.

From age six to 24 months, water requirements can be met through breastmilk, for the most part, since additional water is already available in many complementary foods like porridges, fruits and vegetables. Sometimes small amounts of safe water may be offered after a meal.

Care is needed to ensure that too much water is not given or added to complementary foods, so that it does not replace or dilute the food's nutrient content. Gruels, soups, broths and other watery foods given to infants usually fall below the recommended energy density for complementary foods (0.6 kcal/g). Reducing the amount of water added to these foods could improve the nutritional status of children in this age group.

### **COMMUNICATING THE MESSAGE STRONGER WITH BREASTMILK ONLY**

The following messages have been used in programmes to persuade mothers, their families, and health workers that breastfed infants do not need to be given water in the first six months of life. The actual messages and channels must be tailored to each particular context.



#### **STRONGER WITH BREASTMILK ONLY**

**no water until 6 months for a healthier baby**

Protecting, promoting and supporting giving babies breastmilk only, no water for the first six months of life in West And Central Africa.

Consult the *Stronger With Breastmilk Only Reference List* for more information

### **COMMUNICATING THE MESSAGE STRONGER WITH BREASTMILK ONLY**

#### **Define clearly the meaning of exclusive breastfeeding**

- \* Exclusive breastfeeding means giving only breastmilk from the moment of birth and for the first six months of life. No water, liquids, teas, herbal preparations, or foods should be given during the first six months of life.
- \* It is important to name the drinks and foods commonly given in the first six months. One programme found that women did not think the advice 'do not give water' applied to herbal teas or other fluids.

#### **Take ideas often associated with water (and other liquids) and apply them to colostrum**

- \* Colostrum is the welcoming food for newborns. It is also the first immunization, protecting a baby from illness.
- \* Colostrum cleans the newborn's stomach and helps evacuate the black stool. Sugar or any other type of water is not needed.

#### **Explain and help families visualize what breastmilk contains and why babies who receive breastmilk do not need water**

- \* Breastmilk is 88 per cent water. Every time a mother breastfeeds, she gives her baby water through her breastmilk.
- \* Breastmilk has everything a baby needs to quench thirst and satisfy hunger. It is the best possible food and drink that can be offered a baby so the baby will grow to be stronger and healthier.

#### **Point out the risks of giving water**

- \* Giving water to babies can cause diarrhoea and respiratory illnesses. Breastmilk is natural, clean and pure and protects against disease.
- \* An infant's stomach is small. When the baby drinks water, there is less room left for the nourishing breastmilk that is necessary for the infant to grow strong, smart and healthy.

#### **Link good breastfeeding practices to adequate fluid intake by the baby**

- \* When a mother thinks her baby is thirsty, she should breastfeed immediately. This will give the baby all the water that is needed.
- \* The more often a woman breastfeeds, the more breastmilk is produced, which means more water for the baby.

#### **Explain that breastmilk cannot spoil in the breast**

- \* Breastmilk is blessed. It never spoils while in the breast and cannot be dangerous.
- \* Breastmilk is perfectly tailored to baby's needs and will only make the baby healthier, stronger and smarter.

#### **Encourage breastfeeding mothers to drink enough water and eat a healthy diet**

- \* When it's hot, the mother should breastfeed the baby more often. She should drink enough water to keep herself well hydrated.
- \* Breastfeeding women should eat and drink more than usual, consuming a variety of nutritious foods.