

**Mother's
milk only in
the first six
months of life
makes children
healthier**



Why

does mother's milk only in the first six months of life make children healthier?

Giving mother's milk only to the infant for the first six months of life is a key action for child survival.

In India, only 46 per cent of infants under six months are exclusively breastfed. The proportion of children under six months who are exclusively breastfed decreases with age; from 69 per cent in the first and second months to 28 per cent in the fifth and sixth months of life.

Mother's milk only in the first six months of life ensures maximum protection against malnutrition, illness and death

- Exclusively breastfed infants – those who are given mother's milk only – are at a lower risk of diseases like diarrhoea and infections involving the nose, throat and lungs, major causes of death among infants.
- Exclusive breastfeeding ensures that newborns get colostrum, the first thick yellowish milk from the breast that provides protection against infection; colostrum is children's 'first vaccine'.

Infants given mother's milk only in the first six months do not need other liquids, milk or foods

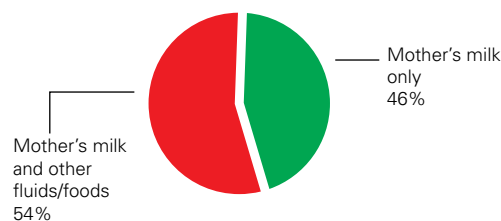
- Infants who are exclusively breastfed in the first six months of life – with frequent, on demand feedings – do not need water or any other liquids even in hot climates; mother's milk is all they need for survival and optimal growth and development.
- Giving infants water, other liquids or other foods before six months introduces germs, reduces the amount of breast milk consumed, and leads to disease and malnutrition.

Families benefit from exclusive breastfeeding

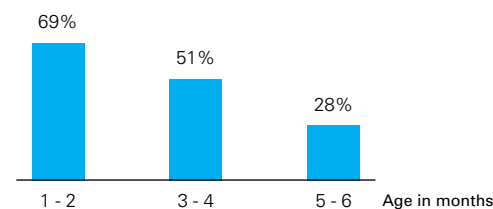
- Exclusive breastfeeding helps to increase the time between pregnancies, which naturally help to space births.
- Exclusive breastfeeding is economical as families do not need to spend money on expensive infant foods.

Where are we today?

Breastfeeding practices of infants under six months of age (%)



Infants under six months of age who are fed mother's milk only (%)



Source: NFHS-3, 2006

How to ensure that all children are fed mother's milk only in the first six months of life?

Raise awareness of the importance of exclusive breastfeeding

- Raise awareness among key stakeholders at all levels on the importance of exclusive breastfeeding for the survival, growth and development of children through meetings, mass media campaigns and behaviour change communication programmes.

Improve maternity entitlements, implement laws to support exclusive breastfeeding

- Build awareness of maternity entitlements and improve legislation on maternity benefits across all labour laws for both organized and unorganized sectors.
- Develop practical guidelines and tools for the implementation and monitoring of laws related to maternity entitlements.

Improve programming, scale up interventions

- Improve the performance of primary level providers and frontline workers in protecting, promoting and supporting exclusive breastfeeding through better training, communication materials and job aids, supportive supervision, and counselling support.
- Ensure coordinated programmes by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and Ministry of Women and Child Development to scale-up support for exclusive breastfeeding.