

CELEBRATING BREASTFEEDING WEEK - 2024; WHAT HAVE WE ACHIEVED AND WHAT CAN STILL BE DONE?

Nagendra Chaudhary

Department of Pediatrics

Universal College of Medical Sciences

Bhairahawa, Nepal

Breastfeeding week is held in the first week of August every year. The event is organized and supported by World alliance for breastfeeding action (WABA), World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and many ministries of health and civil society partners. It is celebrated in more than 120 countries worldwide. World breastfeeding week was first celebrated in 1992 by WABA and is now observed in over 120 countries by UNICEF, WHO and their partners including individuals, organizations, and governments. WABA itself was formed on 14 February 1991 with the goal to re-establish a global breastfeeding culture and provide support for breastfeeding everywhere.¹

Breastfeeding is essential for child survival and health. Breast milk is a safe, natural, nutritious, and sustainable food for babies. Breast milk contains antibodies that help protect against many common childhood illnesses such as diarrhea and respiratory diseases.² Breastfeeding is one of the most effective ways to ensure child health and survival. It has been found that, currently, fewer than half of infants under 6-month are exclusively breastfed. It is estimated that inadequate breastfeeding is responsible for 16% of child deaths each year. Breastfed children have been found to perform better on intelligence tests and are less likely to be overweight or obese later in life. Also, breastfeeding women also have a reduced risk of cancer and type II diabetes.^{3,4}

In 2018, a World Health Assembly resolution endorsed World Breastfeeding Week as an important health promotion strategy. The breast feeding week is celebrated with different theme each year. The theme for 2024 breast feeding week is "Closing the gap: Breastfeeding support for all". It aims to promote the enabling environments that help women to breastfeed anytime anywhere with respect for women's autonomy. Breast feeding support also includes support in the community and the workplace, with adequate protections in government policies and laws. The breast feeding week also focuses sharing information on breastfeeding benefits and strategies. It also helps in implementation of international code of marketing of breast milk substitutes.⁵ The aggressive marketing of breast-milk substitutes (BMS) is harmful, discouraging women from breastfeeding their babies and undermining health, growth, and development. The international code of marketing of breast-milk substitutes defines appropriate restrictions on the promotion of BMS in order to protect breastfeeding.⁶

The "Global Breastfeeding Scorecard" examines current breastfeeding practices around the world, considering the timing of initiation, exclusivity in the first six months of life, and continuation up to two years of age. In addition, it documents national performance on key indicators of how breastfeeding is being protected and supported. Globally,

rates of exclusive breastfeeding in the first six months of life have increased by 10% points over the past decade and are at 48% for 2023, close to the World Health Assembly target of 50% by 2025. Progress is happening across different regions where numerous countries in Africa, Asia, Europe and Oceania have documented large increases in exclusive breastfeeding with increases of more than ten percentage points in 22 countries since 2017. The Global Breastfeeding Collective has set a target to reach 70% by 2030.⁷

Out of 100 countries that have updated their data on exclusive breastfeeding since the Global Breastfeeding Scorecard was first published in 2017, 70 countries have documented an increase in exclusive breastfeeding. Of these, 22 countries documented an increase of more than ten percentage points.⁸

In Nepal, integrated management of acute malnutrition (IMAM) and mother-baby friendly hospital initiative (MBFHI) were promoted and institutionalized to reduce child wasting and improve early initiation of breastfeeding. The number of MBFHI hospitals increased from 25 in 2022 to 52 in 2023, with 90% of babies born in these hospitals breastfed within one hour of birth. Furthermore, a breakthrough was achieved for children, with the Government of Nepal, with UNICEF revising the national breast milk substitute act for the first time since it was introduced 33 years ago. The act is now with the national cabinet for final approval. The government also has approved a 6-month paid maternity leave policy for mothers in public offices to promote exclusive breastfeeding during the first six months of life.⁹

Organizing breastfeeding week programmes all around the globe has provided a positive impact in improving the health status of babies and declining malnutrition. Additionally, the policy makers of every nation should provide more suitable environment to support and encourage mothers as well as families so that the aim of celebrating breast feeding week is fulfilled soon in near future. Community support for women to breastfeed anytime, anywhere should be provided, so that it is normalized and not censured in public life. Effective maternity entitlements that do not force women to choose between their families and their work should be promoted. Trained health professionals who can provide helpful and respectful breastfeeding support should be available for those mothers and an end to exploitative baby-milk promotions in all contexts should be implemented by the government and policy makers.

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