

Exclusive Breastfeeding in Special Situations

Exclusive breastfeeding and HIV. 10-20% of infants of HIV positive mothers may become infected through breastfeeding. However, if women chooses not to breastfeed, their infants run all the risks of artificial feed-ing, which are particularly serious when the safe prepa-ration of artificial feeds is difficult, or if the level of infectious diseases is high.



Mothers who are HIV positive need counselling to help them to decide the best method of infant feeding in their particular situation. They then need skilled help to carry out their chosen method as

safely as possible¹³. Methods recommended to reduce the risk of transmission include:

- breastfeed exclusively from the breast;
- breastfeed with a good technique to prevent mastitis and sore nipples;
- stop breastfeeding early, as soon as replacement feeding is accessible, feasible, affordable, sustainable and safe, or at about six months.

Mothers who do not know their HIV status should breastfeed according to the "Gold Standard".

Low birth weight (LBW) babies grow well and are healthier when they are fed breastmilk exclusively. Other forms of nutrition support may be needed in the early days before the baby's condition is stable¹⁴. Supplements such as calcium and phosphate, if needed, can be given with breastmilk. The iron stores that they get before birth from their mothers are smaller than normal, so iron supplements may be needed from about eight weeks of age².

Premature babies who are eight weeks premature can start suckling at the breast. Babies who are four weeks premature can feed themselves entirely at the breast. Feeds may need to be more frequent and take longer than with larger babies. If an infant cannot take all its feeds from the breast, the mother can express breastmilk and cup feed. Mothers who have learned how to express and cup feed are often very good at teaching and helping others.

Babies who are not exposed to sunlight may benefit from being given vitamin D to prevent rickets (weakened bones)³.



The Global Strategy

In 2002, WHO and UNICEF launched the Global Strategy for Infant and Young Child Feeding¹ which calls upon all governments and others "to ensure that all health and other relevant sectors protect promote and support exclusive breastfeeding for six months, and continued breastfeeding up to two years of age or beyond, while providing women access to the support that they require – in the family, the community and the workplace – to achieve this goal".

Exclusive breastfeeding... is important for the mother too

Exclusive breastfeeding can prevent a new pregnancy in the first six months, provided her periods have not started again⁹, and it can help her to lose any extra weight that she gained in pregnancy. She has less risk of cancer of the breast and ovary, and possibly of osteoporosis⁶.

Why are so many babies not breastfed exclusively?

Because mothers, health professionals, family and community members do not understand what exclusive breastfeeding is, or that it makes a difference. They do not know enough about how breastfeeding works best, how to start it, and what to do when a mother has difficulties. So they are not able to provide the advice and support that she needs.

Because mothers, health professionals, family and community members do not believe that exclusive breastfeeding for six months is possible or that mothers have enough milk. They do not appreciate that any additional foods or fluids can actually be harmful to the baby.

Because mothers have to return to work before six months, either in or out of the home.

Because commercial advertising conveys the message that breast plus formula is even better than just breast milk.

Achieving the Gold Standard – Exclusive Breastfeeding as the Social Norm

To be able to breastfeed exclusively, and to resist the pressure and temptation to give other feeds, mothers need accurate knowledge and a supportive environment. This is possible when everyone including health professionals, family and community members are accurately informed and when exclusive breastfeeding is the social norm.

continued on page 4