



More than 170 countries in the world will be celebrating World Breastfeeding Week from 1 to 7 August 2016 to support and encourage breastfeeding practices in order to improve the health of babies around the world.

Breastfeeding is the best way to provide infants with the nutrients they need. WHO recommends exclusive breastfeeding starting within one hour after birth until a baby is 6 months old. Nutritious complementary foods should then be added while continuing to breastfeed for up to 2 years or beyond.

However, breastfeeding practices differ across the globe; only about 29% of infants under 6 months of age are exclusively breastfed in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, which is still below the WHO global target of 50% by 2030. Increasing support for breastfeeding is therefore a public health imperative.

WHO emphasizes that breastfeeding needs to be protected, promoted and supported among all, but in particular among poor and vulnerable groups. This will help to reduce inequalities. Women in paid employment should be helped to continue exclusive breastfeeding by providing them with minimum enabling conditions, for example, paid maternity leave, part-time work arrangements, facilities for expressing and storing breast milk and breastfeeding breaks.

Breast milk provides all the nutrients and fluids that babies need during their first 6 months for healthy growth and development, and continues to be an essential source of nutrition until the age of 2 and beyond.

Exclusively breastfed babies have better resistance against common childhood illnesses, such as diarrhoea, respiratory infections and ear infections. In later life, those who were breastfed as infants are less likely to become overweight or obese, or to suffer from noncommunicable diseases, such as diabetes, heart disease and stroke. It also strengthens the bond between mothers and their babies and benefits maternal health.

**Related links**

[World Breastfeeding Week 2016](#)

[The urgent need to fully implement the International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes and relevant World Health Assembly resolutions](#)

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