

Only 34% of babies under 6 months are exclusively breastfed, according to the Somali GovernmentMogadishu, 1 August 2022 – While marking World Breastfeeding Week this year, the Ministry of Health and Human Services, Federal Republic of Somalia, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Health Organization (WHO) called for a concerted effort from all actors to ensure breastfeeding-friendly environments for mothers and babies in all health facilities and workplaces in the country. Underpinned by evidence-based national policies, this would help improve exclusive breastfeeding rates among Somali women, and adequate nutrition and health among Somali children in both the short and long term.

"We are calling on parents, families, community leaders, policy-makers and development partners to actively step up capacity and transform systems at all levels to support breastfeeding adequately," said HE Dr Fawziya Abikar Nur, Somalia's Federal Minister of Health and Human Services. "All the support systems, from family, community and health facilities, should be educated and capacitated to support mothers to optimally breastfeed their babies. This includes breastfeeding right from birth through early initiation of breastfeeding within the first hour of birth, exclusive breastfeeding during the first 6 months of the child's life and continued breastfeeding up to 2 years and beyond."

This is part of a global call to action to 'Step up for breastfeeding: Educate and support.' It comes at a time when Somalia is witnessing an increase in child malnutrition, including a

reduction in infant and young child feeding practices, due to steep declines in household incomes, among other challenges. Shocks such as drought, flooding, conflict, displacement, and disease outbreaks like measles and COVID-19 have deepened inequalities and resulted in nutrition insecurity.

WHO and UNICEF recommend early initiation of breastfeeding within the first hour of birth, feeding the child only breast milk for the first 6 months (exclusive breastfeeding), and continuing to breastfeed for up to 24 months or beyond, with the introduction of timely, nutritionally adequate and safe complementary, solid foods at 6 months. It is important for mothers to offer colostrum, the first form of breastmilk released after giving birth, to newborns as it is high in nutrients, antibodies and antioxidants.

"Breastfeeding provides children the best start in life as it is designed for a child's nutritional and immunological needs," said Wafaa Saeed, UNICEF Representative in Somalia. "Breastmilk helps to prevent infections, promotes bonding between mother and child, regardless of setting, and provides food and nutrition security to infants from the very beginning of life, contributing to the food security of the whole family."



Somali mothers, generally caregivers of their families, need a supportive environment to be able to breastfeed their babies properly. Credit: WHO Somalia/ Ismael Taxta During World

Breastfeeding Week, breastfeeding awareness campaigns will be launched throughout the country, and skilled breastfeeding counselling will be provided in various settings, including health facilities and clinics and through home visits by community health workers. The campaign will also stress that breastfeeding is still safe during the COVID-19 pandemic and the current drought emergency. Breastfeeding remains the essential, safest and cheapest food for the child, and it is a baby's first vaccine, providing antibodies that give babies a critical boost.

"In a fragile country like Somalia, affected by conflict and recurring emergencies such as drought, COVID-19, and other diseases, breastfeeding is an effective way to ensure child health and survival. Breastfeeding offers babies all the energy and nutrients that they need for their first months of life, and complements other foods after the first 6 months. We need to jointly create an environment to encourage Somali mothers to breastfeed their newborns and babies," said Dr Mamunur Rahman Malik, WHO Representative to Somalia and Head of Mission.

As part of the Federal Ministry of Health's national nutrition strategy 2020–2025, countrywide efforts will be scaled up with the primary goal to increase the number of babies aged 0–6 months old who are exclusively breastfed to above 50% by 2025. According to the latest government data, only 34% of babies under 6 months are exclusively breastfed.

"Breastfeeding must be considered a public health issue that requires capacity and education at all levels. Together, we can ensure that every mother has access to information, and skilled breastfeeding counselling, empowering her to give her baby the best possible start in life," added the Health Minister.

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Note to editors:

In 2018, a World Health Assembly resolution endorsed World Breastfeeding Week as an important breastfeeding promotion strategy.

The importance of breastfeeding is mentioned in the Holy Quran, in the 233rd verse of Sura

Al-Baqarah, in which it is stated that: "mothers [should] breastfeed their children for a total of 2 years."

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