

LANCET BREASTFEEDING SERIES

Key Messages and Findings

- Breastfeeding has substantial benefits for women and children in high- and low-income countries alike, and the evidence now is stronger than ever.
- The health and economic benefits of breastfeeding are huge: increasing breastfeeding rates could save hundreds of thousands of lives and add hundreds of billions of dollars to the global economy each year.
- Increasing the rates of breastfeeding worldwide is a fundamental driver in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. Breastfeeding plays a significant role in improving nutrition, education, and maternal and child health and survival.
- Rapid progress is possible, and we know what needs to be done—more countries need to invest in the policies and programs that support women’s breastfeeding decisions.

Breastfeeding has a multitude of benefits for women and children, regardless of whether they live in a high- or low-income country or in a rich or poor household.

- Breastfeeding saves lives and improves health.
 - As a perfectly adapted nutritional supply, breastmilk is the ultimate personalized medicine.
 - Improving breastfeeding practices could save about 820,000 lives a year, 87% of them infants under 6 months of age.
 - Nearly half of all diarrhea episodes and one-third of all respiratory infections would be prevented with increased breastfeeding in low- and middle-income countries.
 - There is growing evidence that breastfeeding decreases the prevalence of overweight/obesity and diabetes later in life.
- Breastfeeding helps prepare children for a prosperous future.
 - Longer breastfeeding is associated with higher performance on intelligence tests among children and adolescents (3 points on average), controlling for maternal IQ.
 - Some studies show that increased intelligence as a result of breastfeeding translates to improved academic performance, increased long-term earnings and productivity.
 - Globally, estimated costs of lower cognitive ability associated with not breastfeeding amount to about \$300 billion annually (representing 0.49% of global gross national income, or GNI).
 - High-income countries lose more than \$230 billion annually (0.53% of GNI) due to low rates of breastfeeding.
 - Low- and middle-income countries lose more than \$70 billion annually (0.39% of GNI) due to low rates of breastfeeding.
- Breastfeeding also benefits mothers’ health.
 - For each year a mother breastfeeds, her risk of developing invasive breast cancer decreases by 6%. Breastfeeding also reduces the risk of ovarian cancer.
 - Current rates of breastfeeding prevent almost 20,000 deaths from breast cancer each year, and another 20,000 deaths could be prevented by improving breastfeeding practices.
- In addition to economic gains, the estimated health benefits of breastfeeding translate to reduced annual healthcare costs totaling \$312 million in the US, \$48 million in the UK, \$6 million in Brazil and \$30.3 million in urban China.

Despite this growing body of evidence, women worldwide do not have the support they need to breastfeed.

- Limited or nonexistent maternity protection policies prevent many women from optimally breastfeeding.
 - Short maternity leave (6 weeks) increases the odds of not breastfeeding or stopping early by 400%.
 - Less than one quarter (23%) of countries meet or exceed the International Labor Organization’s recommended 18 weeks for maternity leave.
- Gaps in knowledge and skills among healthcare providers often leave women without access to accurate information or support.
- Family, community and cultural traditions also have a strong influence on women’s breastfeeding decisions. We must create a new normal where women are supported in their decisions to breastfeed – at home, work and in the community.
- Marketing by the large and growing breast-milk substitute industry also undermines breastfeeding.
 - Between 2014 and 2019, global breast-milk substitute sales are projected to increase from \$45 billion to \$71 billion.
 - The Middle East, Africa and the Asia-Pacific region are the areas where growth is expected to be the highest, increasing by a projected 7% and 11%, respectively.

Rates of breastfeeding have not substantially increased in the past two decades, and most countries are off track to meet the global target.

- All infants under 6 months should be exclusively breastfed, yet only 37% currently meet this goal. The global target is to increase the rate of exclusive breastfeeding for the first 6 months to at least 50%.
- Low levels of optimal breastfeeding affect both high- and low-income countries. Breastfeeding is one of the few health and nutrition indicators for which low-income countries are closer to international recommendations than high-income ones.
 - For each doubling in national GDP per capita, breastfeeding prevalence at 12 months decreases by 10 percentage points.
 - Fewer than 20% of children in high-income countries are breastfed for 12 months.
 - In low- and middle-income countries, less than 40% of infants under 6 months are exclusively breastfed, and only two-thirds of children between 6 months and 2 years receive any breast milk.

Mothers are 2.5 times more likely to breastfeed where breastfeeding is protected, promoted and supported.

- Supportive programs include one-on-one counselling or group education, breastfeeding support at delivery, and lactation training for health staff.
- Breastfeeding rates can be dramatically improved in a very short time. A package of actions, policies, and programs to support mothers at health facilities, at home, and at work is shown to have the greatest impact. We must:
 - **Disseminate accurate information** on the value of breastfeeding as a powerful intervention for health and development, benefitting both children and women.
 - **Foster positive social attitudes toward breastfeeding** and reinforce a breastfeeding culture.
 - **Demonstrate political will** to support breastfeeding.
 - **Regulate the breast-milk substitute industry** by implementing, monitoring and enforcing the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes.
 - **Scale up and monitor breastfeeding interventions** and trends in breastfeeding practices.

- **Enact policy interventions** to ensure that maternity protection and workplace interventions are implemented and that health and maternity services are breastfeeding-friendly and comply with the Code.

Commitment and investments for women’s and children’s health—including breastfeeding—will bring the global target within reach and drive progress toward other health and development goals.

- Investing and scaling up the quality and coverage of care for women and their newborns will yield a triple return on investment, preventing 54% of maternal deaths, 71% of newborn deaths and 33% of stillbirths.
- The health of women, children and adolescents is intrinsically linked to bringing about the transformative change needed to shape a more prosperous and sustainable future for all.
- Tremendous progress has been made in the last 15 years and continued progress in reproductive, maternal, newborn, child and adolescent health (RMNCAH) is critical to advancing the *Global Strategy for Women’s, Children’s and Adolescents’ Health* and its objectives of Survive, Thrive and Transform which underpin the *Every Woman Every Child* movement. The survival, health and well-being of women, children and adolescents are essential to ending extreme poverty, promoting development and resilience and on delivering on the new Sustainable Development Goals.
- This year *The Lancet* will produce a set of new evidence focusing on key topics highlighted by the *Global Strategy for Women’s, Children’s and Adolescents’ Health*. This includes the launch of dedicated Series on Stillbirths (January), **Breastfeeding (January)**, a report by *The Lancet* Commission on Adolescent Health and Wellbeing (May), and future Series on Maternal Health, Early Childhood Development, Women’s Health and Maternal and Child Survival. *Every Woman Every Child* will bring this evidence to the attention of countries and partners in support of the implementation of the Global Strategy.