



What makes breast best for baby and mum?

As family lifestyles and responsibilities change, and new products are brought to market there has been a decrease in breastfeeding, with many families opting use formula to feed their babies, rather than breast milk. A 2010 study by the Human Sciences Research Council found that only 25% of mothers in South Africa exclusively breastfed, while 75% used formula or mixed feeding of breast milk, formula, solids and other liquids during their baby's first six months¹.

But the Association for Dietetics in South Africa (ADSA) reasserts that breast milk is the only food and liquid that is needed during the first six months of a baby's life. It provides all the energy and nutrients - fat, sugar, water, and protein- a baby needs and has other health and development benefits.

"Breastfeeding should be initiated within 30 minutes of birth and mothers who are physically able to should practice exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months. This should be followed by the appropriate and adequate introduction of complementary foods at six months, with continued breastfeeding for two years and beyond. The long term benefits of this practice are well documented," says ADSA President and registered dietitian Berna Harmse.

Even in hot climates breast milk with its 88% water content is more than enough to satisfy a baby's thirst. In fact, giving water and teas to a baby can increase the risk of diarrhoea and other infections.

The poor exclusive breastfeeding rates and increase in infant and child morbidity and mortality in South Africa have led to greater efforts to promote, protect and support breastfeeding.

Says Harmse, "Health professionals have long known that infants who are breast-fed contract fewer infections than do those who are given formula. Studies show that artificially fed babies, that is those who are fed formula, are at greater risk of developing asthma, diabetes, cardiovascular disease and even leukaemia."

"There are also benefits for mums who breastfeed. Apart from the opportunity to bond with the baby, those who breastfeed reduce their risk of postnatal haemorrhaging and ovarian cancer," she points out.

The Global Strategy for Infant and Young Child Feeding by the World Health Organization (WHO) and The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) recommends exclusive breastfeeding (including expressed or 'pumped' breast milk) for the first six months (180 days) of life where possible. This means no other liquids or solids should be given to the infant during this time.

Yet a common response to problems of babies who are perceived to be thirsty, unsatisfied, or crying after feeds is to supplement with other fluids or feeds. Formula feeding is also sometimes seen as an expression of wealth.

The HIV and AIDS pandemic has, too, contributed to the decrease in breastfeeding in South Africa because there was a risk that virus can be passed from mother to child through breastfeeding. The introduction of new treatment regimens for mothers and babies has all but eliminated this risk, and therefore breastfeeding is universally recommended for feeding babies.

¹ Human Science Research Council, 2010, 'South Africa National HIV Prevalence, Incidence, Behaviour and Communication Survey 2008: The Health of our Children

Media Release

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ADSA's stance on the topic is clear: breast is best and families' should make a conscious decision to choose breastfeeding to feed their babies, and so nurture their babies' short and long term health.

World Breastfeeding Week is celebrated every year from 1 to 7 August in more than 120 countries to encourage breastfeeding and improve the health of babies around the world.

For more information on breastfeeding and nutrition, contact a registered dietitian. Visit www.adsa.org.za

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