

1. The Issue

According to *The Lancet*, a leading medical journal, suboptimum breastfeeding results in more than 820,000 child deaths annually. Optimal infant and young child feeding (IYCF), as recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO) and The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), refers to mothers initiating breastfeeding within one hour of birth, and breastfeeding exclusively for the first six months. At six months, breastfeeding is continued with nutritionally adequate, safe, local, age-appropriate, responsive complementary feeding for two years or more. (See: <http://www.thelancet.com/series/maternal-and-child-nutrition>)



It is estimated that 13% of under-five deaths can be prevented by breastfeeding. A further 6% can be prevented by ensuring optimal complementary feeding. This means that one in eight of the young lives lost each year could be prevented through optimal breastfeeding, making it one of the most effective ways to prevent diseases and malnutrition. Initiating breastfeeding within the first hour of birth can reduce neonatal mortality by 22%. Unfortunately more than half of the world's newborns are not breastfed within the first hour.

Diarrhoea and pneumonia are common causes of death in infants who are artificially fed. A non-breastfed child is ten times more likely to die from diarrhoea in the first six months of life than an exclusively breastfed child. Breastfeeding also prevents a range of non-communicable diseases such as obesity, diabetes, eczema and wheezing.

Breastfeeding with appropriate complementary feeding saves more lives than any other preventive intervention.

Not only is breastfeeding healthy for babies, there are many benefits for mothers as well. Research shows that mothers who breastfeed their babies have a lower risk of developing diabetes, osteoporosis, breast, ovarian and uterine cancer, hypertensive and cardiovascular diseases (Lancet, 2016).