

More than half of infants in developing countries are breast fed for less than six months, report says

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More than half of infants born in developing countries each year are being breast fed for less than the recommended six months, warns a new report.

The report investigates breastfeeding practices and infant feeding policies in 33 developing countries taking part in the World Breastfeeding Trend Initiative. This is an ongoing project being run by the International Baby Food Action Network Asia to help countries monitor implementation of measures to achieve the World Health Organization's recommendations on feeding of infants.

Its results show that only around 36 million of the 78 million infants born each year in the 33 countries surveyed get what is considered the optimal amount of breast feeding. The report defines this as exclusive breast feeding for the first six months and appropriate complementary feeding after six months together with continuing breast feeding.

National organisations in the 33 countries taking part used 15 indicators to assess policies and programmes on feeding of infants and young children, including having a national policy on infant feeding and median duration of breast feeding.

They colour coded results to make them easier to interpret. No countries achieved the top score, coded green (above 90% implementation of the indicators); nine countries were rated blue (61-90%), with Sri Lanka achieving the highest score; most countries, including Pakistan, China, and India, scored yellow (31-60%); and two countries, Cape Verde and Taiwan, had the lowest rating of red (0-30%).

The analysis showed that most of the countries hadn't been able to increase rates of exclusive breast feeding for the first six months because they had failed to act on three recommended interventions: having a national plan of action with a budget; good healthcare support facilities; and adequate maternity protection, which includes measures to enable women working outside the home to be able to breast feed from birth to six months.

The results “clearly indicate that achieving optimal rates of breastfeeding has not yet been a priority for any of the nations assessed,” the report says. It notes, “Support to women to carry out optimal feeding practices through maternity protection receives an abysmally low average of 4.67 [out of 10].”

This was second lowest only to the indicator of policies and plans to support best practice in feeding of infants and young children in disasters and emergencies, which received an average score of 2.73. The average score for policies and plans to support best practice in feeding among infants and children of mothers with HIV was also low (4.67), even though HIV and AIDS have reached epidemic proportions in several of the countries.

The report says that supporting women adequately is the underlying issue in all three of these worst scoring areas. “In the context of maternity protection, it can mean adequate paid leave, financial and/or nutritional assistance, skilled counselling, accessible and adequate childcare facilities,” it said.

Arun Gupta, a senior paediatrician in New Delhi who developed the World Breastfeeding Trend Initiative and the regional coordinator of International Baby Food Action Network Asia, said, “Much more needs to be done to support women with maternity protection to enable them to combine breast feeding with returning to work.”

In the case of breast feeding among women with HIV, the report calls for further action on women’s health care, counselling, and support to women to carry out their choice of feeding method. And it suggests: “Women in disaster situations in particular need access to skilled counselling, help in care and rehabilitation of the family, access to privacy, emotional support, and protection from dumped baby milks and baby foods.”

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Notes

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Footnotes

- *The State of Breastfeeding in 33 Countries* is at www.worldbreastfeedingtrends.org/WBTi-report.php.