

Press Release - April 10, 2001

The experts give new recommendations on optimal duration of exclusive breastfeeding and age of introduction of complementary foods

Optimum infant feeding practices are of fundamental importance for the survival, growth, development, health and nutrition of infants and young children. There has been a considerable debate on optimal duration of exclusive breastfeeding even though a consensus was there since long on the need for exclusive breastfeeding.

Recently, the World Health Organization (WHO) commissioned a systematic review of scientific literature on exclusive breastfeeding and more than 3000 references were identified for review and evaluation. It was then subjected to a global peer review by experts in this field. These experts met in Geneva from 28th to 30th March in order to settle an old debate about the optimal duration of exclusive breastfeeding.

After the World Health Assembly Resolution 47.5 of 1994, it has taken seven years settle this 'scientific' and 'political' issue of period of exclusive breastfeeding and age of introduction of complementary foods.

The experts recommended exclusive breastfeeding for six months, with the introduction of complementary foods thereafter, for all populations. The experts recommended that nutritionally adequate, safe and appropriate complementary foods should be added in conjunction with continued breastfeeding.

The recommendation recognizes the reduction of infectious disease morbidity and mortality as the most important potential advantage of exclusive breastfeeding for six months, especially the reduction of gastrointestinal infections.

The experts also felt that the proportion of infants exclusively breastfed at 6 months can be maximized if potential problems are addressed like,

1. The nutritional status of pregnant and lactating mothers.
2. Micronutrient status of infants living in areas with high prevalence of deficiencies such as iron, zinc, and vitamin A.
3. The routine primary health care of individual infants, including assessment of growth and of clinical signs of micronutrient deficiencies

The experts also recognized that exclusive breastfeeding for 6 months though infrequent, but there have been substantial increase over time in several countries, particularly where lactation support is available. Provision of adequate social and nutritional support to lactating women would be essential.

Commenting on this report, said Dr Arun Gupta, National Coordinator of the Breastfeeding Promotion Network of India (BPNI) and South Asia representative of International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN), “I hope it is well received and in a positive manner by every community around the world including infant formula industry who always asked for a scientific answer to this question. The recommendation will allow promotion of exclusive breastfeeding and complementary feeding more clearly than ever and remove all confusions that have cropped up in the past due to varied recommendations by different sectors/groups or organizations.”

It will help mothers in particular to follow and try to achieve one standard recommendation on the period of exclusive breastfeeding and age of introduction of complementary foods. According to Dr MK Bhan of All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), a senior researcher in this field and member of the expert group that met in Geneva, “ it is possible to increase the percentage of exclusively breastfed babies at six months with proper counseling of mothers and it has been demonstrated in one of the recently concluded studies in India.”

Dr RK Anand, an eminent pediatrician, and head of Jaslok Hospital, Mumbai while welcoming the recommendation said, “ The news has come rather too late”. According to his experience and long observation, mothers even in educated and high socio-economic group, if motivated properly, could successfully breastfeed their babies with normal growth at six months.”

And Dr Shanti Ghosh, one of the senior most pediatrics teacher of India retired almost two decade back from Safdarjung Hospital New Delhi, a Maternal and Child Health specialist of global repute welcomed the recommendation, “it is good it has come from the scientific quarters”.

In 1994, the WHA, the policy setting body for WHO adopted a resolution 47.5 calling for complementary feeding to be fostered around six months. i.e. exclusive breastfeeding to be promoted for about six months. However, many manufacturers of infant formula and infant foods continued and continue to market their infant foods/complementary foods even today at four months of age, putting infants at increased risk of diarrhea and death.

The baby food industry has lobbied with member states of WHO and other international bodies such as Codex Alimentarius Commission to support introduction of complementary foods at the age of 4-6 months, which allows them to market their products for extra millions putting profits before health.

WHO Member States are expected to adopt the recommendations of the Expert Consultation at the Fifty-fourth World Health Assembly (WHA) in May 2001, ending seven years of controversy.

It is high time, that public leaders and policy makers end the controversy in their respective areas of work and adopt the new recommendation in the best interest of the health of the children of our nation and support this at the various international forums like World Health Assembly, Codex Alimentarius Commission (the food standard setting body) meetings.

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Encl. Copy of WHO press note on Conclusions and Recommendations of the expert group.

For more information, check at these websites,

<http://www.who.int>

<http://www.ibfan.org>

<http://www.bpni.org>

The Breastfeeding Promotion Network of India (BPNI) is a national network of individuals and organisations working for protection, promotion and support of breastfeeding in India. BPNI believes that breastfeeding is the right of all mothers and children. BPNI works through advocacy, social mobilization, information sharing, education and training of health workers and monitoring the compliance of International Code/The Indian Law to protect breastfeeding. BPNI works as the Regional Focal Point for South Asia for the World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action (WABA) & International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN). BPNI does not accept funds or sponsorship of any kind from the companies producing breastmilk substitutes, related equipment and complementary foods or those have been ever found to violate the IMS Act or International Code.