World Breastfeeding Week - Genesis and Progress

It is common knowledge that breastfeeding has played an important role in the reduction of childhood mortality across various social settings and provides sustainable benefits which extend until adulthood. In a world filled with inequality, crises, and poverty, breastfeeding is the foundation of lifelong good health for babies and mothers.

To create awareness regarding the benefits of breastfeeding among different stakeholders, the World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action, a global network of individuals and organizations working toward protection and promotion of breastfeeding, initiated the observation of “World Breastfeeding Week” in 1991. It was decided that the 1st week of August would be designated for this purpose. A new theme related to breastfeeding would be identified and activities would be carried out in various settings to create awareness on that issue. Over the years, the campaign has received support of international agencies such as the World Health Organization and the United Nations Children’s Fund, leading to its widespread acceptance across the globe.

Baby-friendly Hospital Initiative and Global Strategy for Infant and Young Child Feeding are some of the other global initiatives which have been initiated to revitalize efforts to promote, protect, and support appropriate infant and young child feeding.

The theme chosen for 2018 is Breastfeeding - Foundation for Life focusing on the importance of early initiation of breastfeeding. According to a recent WHO report, an estimated 78 million babies, most of whom are born in low- and middle-income countries, are not breastfed within the 1st h of life, putting them at higher risk of death and disease and making them less likely to continue breastfeeding.

The report also notes that newborns who breastfeed in the 1st h of life are significantly more likely to survive. Even a delay of a few hours after birth could pose life-threatening consequences. Skin-to-skin contact along with suckling at the breast stimulates the mother’s production of breast milk, including colostrum, also called the baby’s “first vaccine,” which is extremely rich in nutrients and antibodies.

Case studies done in three pairs of countries representing about a quarter of all children younger than 5 years of age and 20,000 annual deaths in women caused by breast cancer.

International Labour Organization has noted that although nearly all countries have maternity protection legislation, only 98 (53%) of 185 countries meet the International Labour Organization’s 14-week minimal standard and only 42 (23%) meet or exceed the recommendation of 18 weeks’ leave. The reduction of barriers for working mothers to breastfeed by providing lactation rooms and nursing breaks is low-cost interventions that can reduce absenteeism and improves workforce performance, commitment, and retention.

Despite its established benefits, breastfeeding is no longer a norm in many communities. Multifactorial determinants of breastfeeding need supportive measures at many levels, from legal and policy directives to social attitudes and values, women’s work and employment conditions, and health-care services to enable women to breastfeed.

Breastfeeding provides short-term and long-term health and economic and environmental advantages to children, women, and society. To realize these gains, political support and financial investment are needed to protect, promote, and support breastfeeding.

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