

Breastfeeding: World's most effective, inexpensive life-saver

Durgesh Nandan Jha | TNN

New Delhi: In 2011, more than 6.9 million children died before their fifth birthday. Over 98% of these deaths occurred in developing countries. India accounted for 1.6 million deaths. Pediatricians and public health experts say exclusive breastfeeding for six months can save many such children.

According to the United Nations Children's Funds (Unicef), breastfeeding is the most effective and inexpensive way of saving a child's life.

"Breastfeeding is a baby's 'first immunization' and the most effective and inexpensive life-saver ever," says Unicef deputy executive director Geeta Rao Gupta. "There is no other single intervention that has such a high impact for babies and mothers as breastfeeding and which costs so little for governments." She says starting breastfeeding in the first hour after birth can reduce the risk of newborn death by up to 22% by averting deaths related to sepsis, pneumonia, diarrhoea and hypothermia.

Evidence shows chil-

BENEFITS OF BREASTFEEDING



TO THE CHILD

Starting breastfeeding in the **first hour** after birth improves chances of a child to survive



22%

reduction in the risk of death related to sepsis, pneumonia, diarrhea and hypothermia

14 times

more likely to survive the first six months of life than non-breastfed children



TO THE MOTHER

Starting breastfeeding in the first hour reduces mother's risk of death

Mothers who breastfeed are less likely to become pregnant in the **first six months** following delivery and return to their pre-pregnancy weight sooner

Experience less **post-partum depression** and also have a lower risk of ovarian and breast cancers



dren who are exclusively breastfed are 14 times more likely to survive the first six months of life than non-breastfed children.

Breastfeeding, doctors say, also supports a child's ability to learn and helps prevent obesity and chronic diseases later in life. Recent studies in the US and the UK

point to large health-care savings resulting from breastfeeding, given that breastfed children fall ill much less often than non-breastfed children.

Still, data shows, only 34% of Indian babies are breastfed within one hour of birth. Exclusive breastfeeding for 0-16 months is availa-

ble to 46% of children.

"The challenge of optimal breastfeeding practices cannot be fully met unless we address the feeding difficulties and problems faced by pre-term and low birth-weight babies," says Dr V K Paul, head of the pediatric department at AIIMS. "The healthy babies would fail on breastfeeding only occasionally. Small babies who are vulnerable to failing need assistance because they are the ones who have difficulty in latching on to the breast. Expressing the breast milk and feeding it to the baby with the help of spoon can be helpful."

The government of India and international organizations recommend that infants be breastfed within one hour of birth and be fed only breast milk for the first six months of life. "No other foods or fluids should be added, not even water, for six months," says Dr Manish Malik, neonatologist at Max hospital, Saket.

"The government should look into initiatives such as educating the parent or grandparents about the benefits of breastfeeding prior to the birth of the baby."