Breastfeeding

Why it is important to share and act on this information

Babies who are breastfed are generally healthier and achieve optimal growth and development compared to those who are fed formula milk.

If the vast majority of babies were exclusively fed breastmilk in their first six months of life – meaning only breastmilk and no other liquids or solids, not even water – it is estimated that the lives of at least 1.2 million children would be saved every year. If children continue to be breastfed up to two years and beyond, the health and development of millions of children would be greatly improved.

Infants who are not breastfed are at an increased risk of illness that can compromise their growth and raise the risk of death or disability. Breastfed babies receive protection from illnesses through the mother’s milk.

Breastfeeding is the natural and recommended way of feeding all infants, even when artificial feeding is affordable, clean water is available, and good hygienic conditions for preparing and feeding infant formula exist.

If a mother is HIV-positive, there is a risk that she can transmit HIV to her baby through breastfeeding. Counselling can help her carefully weigh the risks and make an informed decision on which feeding option is best for her baby and most manageable for her.

Almost every mother can breastfeed successfully. All mothers, particularly those who might lack the confidence to breastfeed, need the encouragement and practical support of the baby’s father and their families, friends and relatives. Health workers, community workers, women’s organizations and employers can also provide support.

Everyone has the right to information about the benefits of breastfeeding and the risks of artificial feeding. Governments have a responsibility to provide this information. Communities as well as media and other channels of communication can play a key role in promoting breastfeeding.