

MESSAGE BRIEF – EXCLUSIVE BREASTFEEDING & COLOSTRUM

BEHAVIOUR 1: EXCLUSIVE BREASTFEEDING UNTIL AGE 6 MONTHS

Behaviour to promote

All mothers should breastfeed their babies exclusively for the first six months of life. The secret to having enough breast milk is to exclusively breastfeed. If you do not have enough milk for your baby, breastfeed more frequently and you will produce more milk. If you add other drinks / concoctions or food, including water, this will reduce your milk production.

Reasons

Breast milk production is dependent upon frequent breastfeeding. Interrupting breastfeeding by giving other liquids to a baby will decrease production of breast milk. Breast milk is the best and only food and the best and only drink that an infant needs for the first six months of life, even in hot and dry climates. Through breast milk, the baby receives defences against diseases such as diarrhoea and respiratory infections. Adding other foods or liquids can affect the health of a baby during the first six months of life, because these can be contaminated and may cause diarrhoea. According to the 2013/14 DHS, 48% of children in DRC are breastfed exclusively for the first 6 months of their life.

Barriers to behaviour change

Sometimes mothers who breastfeed their babies are concerned when the baby wants to nurse more often than usual. They can associate this behaviour with a lack of breast milk. A baby may want to nurse more often for several reasons: perhaps a phase of intense growth is happening; he is just more hungry/thirsty; during an episode of illness babies may nurse more often; when teething; or in need of more comfort. A mother may interpret the cries of a baby as signs of hunger, which is often the case, but a baby may also cry because he is tired, or because he wants to burp or pass wind.

Mothers should understand that they can produce enough milk by breastfeeding more frequently. If they believe that their baby needs other liquids or supplementary foods, and they give these to their baby, they may reduce their milk production because if the baby breastfeeds less frequently, the mother will produce less milk.

A widespread barrier is the belief that babies need sugared water¹ in addition to breast milk, and that breast milk alone is not enough. Some women want to feed their baby *manioc* before the age of 6 months, because they fear that giving milk alone may result in stunting. Other liquids/brews or foods do not help the baby, nor their mother, because these increase the baby's risk of illness and the mother will then have to spend even more time taking care of a sick baby.

In some communities, there are aesthetic barriers to exclusive breastfeeding with breastfeeding seen as more *primitive* and likely to result in less attractive breasts, and bottles viewed by some as more *progressive* and *modern* and kinder to the female physique, though this is mostly in urban areas – where formula milk is available. Employed women in urban areas may struggle to find sufficient time for breastfeeding, particularly since work places are only obliged to pay 14 weeks of paid maternity leave. This problem is less in rural areas where the family can accompany mothers in the field.

Decision - The mother's entourage can help by not insisting on the mother giving additional liquids/foods to a baby, but by giving the mother time to nurse until the baby is satisfied, and also by ensuring the mother is well nourished. Men may be involved in deciding to use bottles, because it is seen as a sign of modernity, especially among educated men.

Factors contributing to behaviour change

Women attach great importance to breastfeeding and 98% of children in DRC are breastfed. Children under 6 months are usually in close physical proximity to their mother (on their back) and thus breastfeeding is readily accessible and available. So, mothers can feed their baby when they need to and until the baby is satisfied. Discussing breastfeeding difficulties before they arise can help prevent early abandonment of exclusive breastfeeding.

Water is the main component of breast milk (88%), it is particularly hydrating and quenches thirst. The other components (12%) are: carbohydrates, lipids, proteins, and micronutrients. At the start of feeding, breast milk contains a lot of water and minerals to hydrate. In the middle of a feed, proteins and lipids increase in quantity. At the end of each feed, fat is more concentrated in the milk and gives the baby a feeling of satiety. This signals the end of feeding for the baby. That is why it is necessary to breastfeed the baby for long enough to each breast.

¹ Lingala: Mayi ya sukali ou Mayi ya lobo est utilisé seulement à Kinshasa; Kikongo: Masa ya sukadi; Swahili: mayi ya sukari; Tshiluba: mayi wa sukadi.

BEHAVIOUR 2: COLOSTRUM

Behaviour to promote

Ensure that the newborn remains with the mother immediately after birth - on her chest, with skin to skin contact – so that the mother initiates breastfeeding within the first hour after birth and gives the baby the first milk (colostrum - the thick yellowish milk the mother produces in the first days after birth).

Reasons

Initiating breastfeeding immediately after birth, in the first hour, is very important for the health of a newborn, as through this first milk - also called colostrum, breast milk during the first days after birth - the baby receives defences from the mother against many diseases. This first milk helps the baby eliminate meconium (black stools, of substances which accumulate during their life in the womb). The first milk kick starts the baby's digestive system and gives them the best start for good growth and health.

According to the DHS 2013/14, 90% of babies are breastfed within twenty-four hours of birth, but only 52% start breastfeeding within the first hour of birth. In addition, 11% received other foods before breastfeeding began.

Barriers to behaviour change

Ideas

There is a persistent belief among many ethnic groups that colostrum is bad for the baby and the mother – “dirty/bad milk, rotten milk, fatty milk, sour milk, etc.”- which is why mothers may be urged to throw the first milk, to give other liquids/concoctions, and not to breastfeed the newborn until the appearance of normal milk. Many mothers have a negative attitude towards giving colostrum and do not know the health benefits of colostrum to the baby.

Decision

The entourage of new mothers, especially older women (mothers-in-law, aunts, grandmothers), reinforce the false belief that the first milk is dirty/bad. Breastfeeding a child is a woman's business. If the woman is young, it is the older women who will influence her because they consider themselves more experienced and may accompany the mother during the birth. Sometimes water and herbal brews/washes are given to purify the child to give them health and strength, but more often they are given to the mother to promote her milk flow or stop bleeding after child birth.

Factors contributing to behaviour change

Women attach great importance to breastfeeding. Most children are breastfed within 24 hours after birth, but ideally they should start breastfeeding within the first hour after birth.

Increasingly, due to education and awareness or because a health worker or a family member has recommended it, new mothers are willing to give colostrum to their children.

Some health facilities will promote giving colostrum describing it as “welcome food” for a newborn, or the first form of immunisation to protect the baby against illness, or as cleaning the baby's stomach.