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## **IMPORTANCE OF EXCLUSIVE BREASTFEEDING FOR THE FIRST SIX MONTHS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Exclusive breastfeeding (EBF) for the first six months of life is recognized globally as the cornerstone of optimal infant nutrition and survival. Breast milk provides a perfect balance of nutrients, bioactive compounds, and immune protection essential for growth and development. Despite strong recommendations from the World Health Organization (WHO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), rates of exclusive breastfeeding remain suboptimal in many regions due to cultural beliefs, lack of awareness, and socio-economic barriers. This review highlights the nutritional, immunological, and psychological benefits of exclusive breastfeeding, the challenges to its practice, and strategies to promote its adoption.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Infancy represents a critical window for growth, brain development, and immune system maturation. During the first six months of life, nutritional needs are highly specific, and inappropriate feeding can have long-lasting consequences. Exclusive breastfeeding—defined as feeding the infant only breast milk, without any additional food or drink, not even water—has been universally recommended as the gold standard by WHO. Breast milk is uniquely tailored to meet the infant's developmental needs, ensuring protection against infections, reducing risks of chronic diseases, and fostering maternal–infant bonding.

### **Nutritional Benefits of Exclusive Breastfeeding**

Breast milk contains an ideal composition of macronutrients (proteins, fats, and carbohydrates) and micronutrients (vitamins and minerals) in bioavailable forms. Key components include:

- Proteins such as casein and whey that support growth and digestive health.
- Essential fatty acids like DHA that are critical for brain and visual development.
- Lactose, which provides energy and enhances calcium absorption.
- Micronutrients including vitamins A, D, E, and iron in highly absorbable forms.

Unlike formula, breast milk dynamically adapts to the infant's changing needs across different stages (colostrum, transitional, and mature milk), making it the most suitable food source for infants under six months.

### **Immunological and Health Advantages**

Breastfeeding confers substantial immunological benefits. Colostrum, the first milk, is rich in immunoglobulins, lactoferrin, and lysozymes, which act as the infant's "first vaccine." Exclusive breastfeeding reduces the risk of respiratory infections, diarrhea, otitis media, and sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS). Long-term benefits also include lower incidences of obesity, type 2 diabetes, and cardiovascular diseases in adulthood.

For mothers, breastfeeding decreases postpartum hemorrhage, promotes uterine involution, and reduces risks of breast and ovarian cancers. It also delays the return of fertility (lactational amenorrhea method), contributing to natural birth spacing.

### **Psychological and Developmental Impact**

Breastfeeding is not only a nutritional act but also a profound emotional interaction. Skin-to-skin contact during feeding enhances bonding, reduces infant stress, and fosters secure attachment. Several studies report that breastfed infants have improved cognitive development and higher IQ scores, partly due to the presence of essential fatty acids and growth factors in breast milk.

### **Barriers to Exclusive Breastfeeding**

Despite its benefits, global rates of exclusive breastfeeding remain below recommended levels. Barriers include:

- Cultural beliefs and myths, such as giving water or herbal concoctions.
- Maternal challenges, including inadequate lactation support and return to work.
- Lack of awareness regarding the benefits of EBF.
- Influence of infant formula marketing, which discourages breastfeeding practices.

### **Strategies to Promote Exclusive Breastfeeding**

Promoting exclusive breastfeeding requires a multidimensional approach:

1. Health education during antenatal and postnatal care.
2. Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiatives (BFHI) to encourage breastfeeding immediately after birth.
3. Workplace policies such as maternity leave, breastfeeding breaks, and lactation rooms.
4. Community-based programs involving family and cultural influencers.
5. Strict regulation of formula marketing to prevent misinformation.

### **CONCLUSION**

Exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of life remains the most effective, natural, and sustainable method of ensuring optimal infant health and survival. It is not merely a feeding practice but a life-saving intervention with benefits extending into adulthood. Strengthening awareness, breaking cultural barriers, and providing supportive environments for mothers are essential to achieve global breastfeeding targets. By protecting, promoting, and supporting exclusive breastfeeding, societies invest in the health of future generations.

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