

{HER vision}

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THE POWER OF BREAST MILK

TODAY MARKS THE START OF
THE WORLD BREASTFEEDING
WEEK THAT ENDS ON AUGUST
7. AGNES KYOTALENGERIRE
EXPLORES THE NEED FOR
EXCLUSIVE BREASTFEEDING

Immediately after childbirth, the midwife encouraged me to breastfeed. She emphasised that I should exclusively breastfeed. This is feeding the baby on breast milk only until they are six months old."

I heeded her advice. Whenever I took him for immunisation, fellow mothers would admire him, asking what I fed him on," Jacqueline Basemera recounts. She adds that her baby rarely falls sick.

Nutrition and medical experts assert that if done adequately, breastfeeding benefits both the baby and the mother.

According to the Uganda Demographic Health Survey 2016, about 62% of children born are exclusively breastfed in the first six months. However, Uganda still scores low on initiating breastfeeding in the first hour after birth.

The same report estimates that only 42% of Ugandan babies are breastfed within an hour of being born. If timely initiation is done, breastfeeding can reduce the death of new-borns babies by 22%.

**PREGNANCY
MOTHERS WHO
BREASTFEED
EXCLUSIVELY HAVE
HIGHER CHANCES
OF NOT BECOMING
PREGNANT IN THE
FIRST SIX MONTHS**

Peter Rukundo, a researcher and nutrition expert at the Department of Human Nutrition and Home Economics at Kyambogo University, says exclusive breastfeeding starts with a mother attaching her baby to the breast immediately it is born or within the first hour of birth.

He says breastfeeding within the first hour enables a baby to enjoy the benefits of colostrum; that first yellow milk.

"Colostrum is rich in vitamin A and contains more protein than mature milk (that is produced later). It provides the first immunisation against diseases as it prevents bacterial infections that may endanger new born babies. It has antibodies, white blood cells and other anti-infective proteins not present in mature breast milk.

Rukundo discourages mothers from giving babies artificial feeds at birth, before they breastfeed.

Emily Kamusiime, a senior midwife at Kambuga Hospital in Kanungu district, says exclusive breastfeeding promotes development of the baby's brain and nervous system because of the high nutritional value of breast milk.

THE ISSUE

Score still low

According to the Uganda Demographic Health Survey 2016, about 62% of children born are exclusively breastfed in the first six months. However, Uganda still scores low on initiating breastfeeding in the first hour after birth.

Besides, continuous suckling aids proper development of the jaw and facial structures.

It is not only babies who benefit from breastfeeding.

According to Dr Evelyn Nabunya, a senior consultant obstetrician/gynaecologist at the maternal and foetal medicine unit in Mulago Hospital, mothers who breastfeed, especially soon after birth, are less likely to experience post-partum haemorrhage (bleeding after birth).

Maximum breastfeeding supports the reduction of bleeding by stimulating the release of oxytocin hormone, making the uterus contract quickly and hence reduce bleeding, Nabunya explains. In addition, breastfeeding helps with

natural child spacing. "Mothers who breastfeed exclusively and have not got their periods have higher chances of not becoming pregnant in the first six months after birth," Nabunya says.

Additionally, breastfeeding reduces the risk of breast and ovarian cancers. "Women who breastfeed reduce their risk of developing breast cancer by 25%," affirms Nabunya.

The reduction in risk comes in proportion to the cumulative lifetime duration of breastfeeding; the more months a mother breastfeeds, the lower her risk of breast cancer.

In the same vein, she says one way of fighting uterine and ovarian cancer is through breastfeeding. "During breastfeeding, the oestrogen levels are lowered, making less of the hormone available to stimulate the lining of the uterus and the breast tissue, reducing the risk of becoming cancerous, she explains.

Breastfeeding is also good for the mother's body, but also good for her mind. Josephine Nalugo, a breastfeeding consultant, says mothers who breastfeed tend to suffer less postpartum depression than those giving their babies formula.

Rukundo says the benefits of breastfeeding are not just limited to

health, but also to financial.

He adds that breastfeeding is convenient because the milk is readily available and does not need preparation.

This begs the question, with all these benefits, how can a working mother breastfeed her baby exclusively, especially after resuming work?

Preparation

Amani Kukunda, a first-time mother with a two-week-old baby, recently brushed off a friend who was encouraging her to breastfeed exclusively. "You mean I have to be there to breastfeed the baby all the time? So, what happens when I resume work?" she shot back.

According to Cissy Ssekimpi, a senior midwife working with Mulago Hospital, some working mothers think they cannot exclusively breastfeed, especially after their maternity leave has ended.

Ssekimpi explains that the fears associated with not being able to exclusively breastfeed should be overcome during pregnancy.

Mothers should be prepared how best they will breastfeed exclusively, especially after resuming work.

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