

# Why babies should be breastfed in first hour of birth

By Agnes Kyotalengerire

After giving birth to her first child, Martha Kintu says the midwife advised her to breastfeed the baby immediately and cuddle him to keep him warm.

As explained by Catherine Nyangabyaki, a senior paediatrician at Nsambya Hospital, as soon as a baby is born, it should be placed either on the mother's bare chest or abdomen and covered with a blanket to generate warmth.

"A newborn loses heat quickly because they are small. Remember the baby is coming from a warm environment to a cooler one, which may cause a rapid fall in body temperature and thus complications such as getting infections or death," Nyangabyaki explains.

**Breastfeeding in the first hour**  
Dr Jessica Nakibuuka, a paediatrician at Mulago Hospital, says mothers are advised to initiate the baby into breastfeeding within the first hour and continue doing so for two years.

Breastfeeding in the first hour of life gives the baby nutrients, especially from the first yellow milk called colostrum. Aside, it provides calories from the carbohydrates in the milk, which the baby's body utilises to produce heat to keep warm.

Colostrum is rich in proteins, antibodies and vitamin A, which enhances the baby's immunity. Therefore, it provides the first immunisation against diseases and bacterial infections.

According to the 2016 Uganda Demographic Health Survey, Uganda still scores poorly on initiating breastfeeding in the first hour after birth.

The report estimates that only 42% of Ugandan babies are breastfed within an

hour of being born. If timely initiation is done, it would reduce the death of newborn babies by 22%.

**Other benefits**  
Breastfeeding promotes development of the baby's brain and nervous system because of the high nutritional benefits contained in the milk. The continuous suckling aids proper growth and development of the baby's jaws and facial structures.

Emily Tumusiime, a senior midwife at Kambuga Hospital in Katingu district, explains.

Mothers who breastfeed, especially soon after delivering are less likely to experience post-partum haemorrhage (bleeding after birth).

"Breastfeeding supports the reduction of bleeding by stimulating the release of oxytocin hormone, making the uterus contract quickly and hence reduce bleeding," Dr Evelyn Nabunya, a senior gynaecologist/obstetrician at Mulago Hospital, explains.

However, Dr Nabunya says newborn care is not only about breastfeeding, but it goes beyond and includes aspects of when the baby takes the first bath, umbilical cord care, immunisation and good hygiene practices.

**First bath**  
Dr Hellen Namusoke says whether or not a newborn baby should be bathed immediately after birth depends on



A mother breastfeeds her newborn baby

their health. For instance, babies born prematurely should not be bathed until they weigh 2.5kg.

"Bathing them immediately after birth puts them at risk of their body temperature lowering, which may make them sick," Nakibuuka explains. She adds that science has it that a pre-term baby, who has gained up to 2.5kg, is able to generate required body temperature.

It is not recommended to immediately bathe babies who are unwell, those born tired or with have defects.

Dr Hellen Namusoke, a senior paediatrician working with Bethany Women Hospital in Luzira, Kampala, recommends bathing newborn babies

after 24 hours. In the meantime, Dr Namusoke suggests wiping them using a moist soft cloth.

Additionally, the umbilical cord and the area around it should be wiped using a cotton swab dipped in saline or salty lukewarm water.

**Immunisation**

According to the health ministry guidelines, newborns are given polio and tuberculosis vaccine at birth, preferably before they are discharged from hospitals.

"Most mothers stay live from the health facilities, so we encourage them to have the babies vaccinated at birth for fear of the babies missing out," Dr

## RISKY CULTURAL PRACTICES

The use of *ekyogero*, a cultural herbal bath for newborns, is a common practice in the central, western and southwestern parts of Uganda. Mothers believe it prevents skin diseases and other ailments.

But, according to Dr Jessica Nakilbuka, a senior paediatrician at Mulago Hospital, the mixture of

herbs used to bathe the babies in the first days of life is suspected to cause neonatal septicemia a blood infection, which is a silent killer of newborn babies.

"The way the herbs are prepared, stored and recycled provides a favourable environment for bacteria to grow. The cultured bacteria predispose the baby to infection," Dr Nakibuuka said. According to

a study about the causes of neonatal admissions in Mulago Hospital, 50% of mothers admitted using *ekyogero* to bathe their newborns, while 2% administered it orally.

Dr Jolly Nankunda, a senior neonatologist at Mulago Hospital, affirms that newborns get exposed to infections with the entry point being the umbilical cord, eyes, mouth, skin and genital tract.

**Mushroom soup with ghee**

Sarah Babirye says in Buganda, newborn babies experiencing colic are given mushroom soup (*obutiko obubaala*) mixed with ghee. The concoction is also applied on the baby's umbilical cord to stop the colic and also quicken the cord's healing process," explains Babirye.

**Local brew**

Stephen Besweri, an advocate for the existence of cultural practices in Teso, says some parents still give newborns a few drops of *ajono* for initiation.

However, Dr Nankunda says when you give local brew, you are giving them alcohol, which may cause stimulation, making the baby irritable. "You are also putting a strain on their liver and kidney since the organs are immature," she says.

Namusoke explains, but also says the first vaccination period can be stretched up to two weeks.

**Hand-washing**

To prevent infections, Dr Namusoke says mothers and caregivers are encouraged to wash hands before holding the newborn babies.

However, Dr Namusoke says it is hard to implement the hand-washing practice because people get offended or think the mother is overprotective of her newborn baby.

In such cases, she advises mothers to politely tell the visitors that washing their hands is one way of protecting the baby from acquiring infections.