

Building Healthier Food Environments for the Future

 downtoearth.org.in/health/nourishing-futures-why-breastfeeding-is-the-bedrock-of-healthier-food-environments



Summary

- Breastfeeding is a crucial public health strategy that supports child health, maternal well-being and environmental sustainability.
- Amid the rise of ultra-processed foods, it offers a natural, nutritious alternative.
- Systemic barriers and aggressive marketing of formula milk undermine its practice.
- Strengthening support systems and policies is essential to promote breastfeeding as a cornerstone of healthier food environments.

At a time when food markets are increasingly dominated by ultra-processed products and aggressive marketing, increasing non-communicable diseases, breastfeeding newborns becomes a safe and vital alternative.

Breastfeeding is not just a maternal decision; it is a public health imperative, a food systems solution and a cornerstone of sustainable development.

This Poshan Maah 2025 (National Nutrition Month) serves as a reminder that supporting breastfeeding is not only about feeding babies but about nourishing futures, fostering equity and repairing a food environment that has veered dangerously off course.

Why breastfeeding matters now more than ever

Breastfeeding offers a unique triple win: It benefits child health, maternal well-being and planetary sustainability. According to UNICEF, breastfeeding could prevent over 820,000 child deaths (13 per cent of all child death among children under two years) and 20,000 maternal deaths due to breast cancer each year globally.

Yet, only 64 per cent of infants under six months in India are Exclusively Breast Fed (EBF), according to the National Family Health Survey-5 (2019-21). This falls short of the global target of 70 per cent EBF by 2030.

There is a concerning decline in EBF rates, starting from three months onward, with the average duration of EBF being just four months. This nutritional gap has long-term consequences.

Children who are not breastfed are at greater risk of infections, undernutrition, and even obesity in infancy as well as in later-life. On the other hand, breastfed infants develop healthier taste preferences and stronger immunity, a critical defense in an era of rising diet-related diseases.

Breastfeeding vs modern food environment

Today's food systems are flooded with products high in added sugars, sodium and unhealthy fats, mostly targeted at young children. The increasing normalisation of formula feeding and toddler "snack" foods, often pushed through indirect or surrogate marketing, undermines breastfeeding and exposes children early to hyper-palatable, ultra-processed diets. The trend violates or circumvents the Infant Milk Substitutes, Feeding Bottles and Infant Foods (Regulation of Production, Supply and Distribution) Act, known simply as the IMS Act.

In contrast, breastmilk is naturally tailored to an infant's needs with zero added sugar or salt, rich in antibodies and essential nutrients that adjusts composition dynamically as the baby grows.

It is the only food that comes with no packaging, no additives and no carbon footprint. A 2019 report showed that if every child was breastfed, formula production's carbon impact, equivalent to nearly 4 million tonnes of CO2 per year, could be avoided.

Missing piece: Systems that support breastfeeding

Despite its proven benefits, breastfeeding is often undermined by systemic barriers such as short maternity leave, lack of workplace lactation rooms, inadequate community support and persistent cultural stigma. To create a truly supportive ecosystem, we must ensure stronger maternity protection and provide mandatory lactation spaces in workplaces.

Community-based peer counselling and outreach by frontline health workers play a crucial role in guiding and encouraging mothers. At the same time, the strict enforcement of the IMS Act is essential to curb unethical formula marketing practices that mislead parents and erode trust in breastfeeding.

Public awareness campaigns must work to normalise breastfeeding in both public and private spaces, challenging taboos and reshaping societal attitudes. Breastfeeding doesn't happen in a vacuum, rather it thrives in environments that value care, equity, and health.

Let's Fix Our Food: Sustaining nutrition across life course

The values embedded in breastfeeding, that is, sustainability, tradition, nutrition equity are echoed across the Let's Fix Our Food (LFOF) initiative, jointly led by the Public Health Foundation of India (PHFI), Indian Council of Medical Research-National Institute of Nutrition, India and the United Nations Children's Fund, along with key consortium partners.

Through youth engagement, school-based campaigns and adolescent leadership, LFOF emphasis for nutrition literacy, easy to comprehend front-of-pack nutrition labelling, and regulation of junk food marketing, all aimed at reshaping our food systems for health. Yet, this transformation cannot begin at adolescence. It must start at birth.

Promoting breastfeeding as the foundation of healthy food preferences lays the groundwork for better food choices in childhood and adolescence.

It is time to reaffirm our collective commitment to prioritising breastfeeding as a vital public health and food systems intervention. This means investing in policies that protect and promote breastfeeding, from robust maternity benefits to enforcement of regulations against unethical formula marketing. It also means building systems at home, in communities, in workplaces and in health facilities that make it easier, not harder, for mothers to breastfeed.

Above all, it means recognising breastfeeding not as an isolated act of maternal care, but as the first and perhaps most powerful step in fixing our food. A healthier, more sustainable and more just food future begins here.

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