

WORLD BREASTFEEDING WEEK 2009

UNICEF is pleased to join the World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action (WABA) and its affiliates, WHO and NGO partners in celebrating World Breastfeeding Week, 1-7 August 2009. This year's theme -- Breastfeeding , a Vital Emergency Response: Are You Ready? -- focuses on the vital role of breastfeeding in emergency situations.

Around 9 million children under age five die every year, largely from preventable causes. Undernutrition is an underlying cause in one in three of these child deaths. Undernutrition can also negatively impact a child's development over the long term.

A mother's health and nutrition are intimately linked with the nutritional status and health of her child, so providing proper nutrition for girls and pregnant and nursing women is a key to promoting better nutrition in children.

Breastfeeding is an excellent way to ensure that an infant receives the nutrition necessary for a good start in life. During the first six months of life, breast milk completely meets an infant's nutritional requirements. After six months, an infant's nutritional status can benefit from a variety of complementary foods along with breastfeeding.

According to the Lancet, optimal breastfeeding in the first two years of life, especially exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months, can have the single largest impact on child survival of all preventive interventions, with the potential to prevent 12 to 15 % of all under age 5 deaths in the developing world.

In the past 10 years, 14 countries have shown more than 20 percent increase in rates of exclusive breastfeeding. These countries include Madagascar, Pakistan and Central African Republic, each of which has experienced a significant emergency during this period. When countries recognize the value of breastfeeding and make concerted efforts to promote and protect the practice, progress is possible even in difficult times. But globally the rate of exclusive breast-feeding is still only around 38% and more work is needed to encourage and support breastfeeding.

In emergency situations, children and families often have to live without adequate safe water and sanitation. This increases their vulnerability to infections. Breast milk offers protection against some infections and is, therefore, invaluable for young children in emergency situations. Especially in areas where clean water is lacking, the use of powdered milks and powdered formulas can increase the risk of water-borne illnesses such as diarrhea.

This year's World Breastfeeding Week provides an opportunity to sensitize policy-makers, donors, implementing partners and the general public to the benefits of breastfeeding, to its particular importance in emergency situations, and to the need to protect and support mothers to breastfeed during emergencies.



Ann M. Veneman
Executive Director