

Promoting exclusive breastfeeding: current evidence-based practices and future ideas

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Child health is a growing concern at the global level as infectious diseases and preventable conditions claim the lives of millions of children every year. Due to an inordinate amount of effort in the last two decades, under-five child mortality has decreased from 9.6 million in 2000 to 7.6 million in 2012. Of these, infant deaths represent nearly half of all child under-five losses. The death of 19,000 young children every day is still a major concern, which clearly highlights that further improvements in the quality of care for maternal and child health are essential. Interventions that have been associated with a decrease in infant mortality and disease rates include exclusive breastfeeding. Research suggests that an exclusively breastfed child is 14 times less likely to die in the first six months than a non-breastfed child. This effect is likely because exclusive breastfeeding drastically reduces deaths from acute respiratory infection and diarrhea, two major child killers. Exclusive breastfeeding also supports healthy brain development, improves cognitive performance, and is associated with better educational achievement at age 5. While the potential impact of exclusive breastfeeding practices is especially important in low-income countries, non-breastfed children in high-income countries are also at greater risk of dying. A recent study of post-neonatal mortality in the United States found a 25 % increase in mortality among non-breastfed infants. In the UK Millennium Cohort Survey, six months of exclusive breastfeeding was associated with a 53 % decrease in hospital admissions for diarrhea and a 27 % decrease in respiratory tract infections. While breastfeeding rates overall are not declining at the global level, with many countries experiencing impressive increases in the last decade, less than 40 % of the world's infants benefit from exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months life as recommended with the World Health Organization (WHO). What can we do in our settings to improve exclusive breastfeeding rates? The focus of this presentation will be to outline the research evidence that supports interventions that could be implemented to positively influence exclusive breastfeeding rates. Promising interventions will also be highlighted to help guide future initiatives.