

THE ECONOMIC COST OF NOT BREASTFEEDING ON HUMAN CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT AND HEALTH SYSTEMS IN INDIA

Breastfeeding is one of the best buys in global health to improve social, health, and economic development outcomes.

Globally, improving breastfeeding practices could save more than 820,000 lives annually—87 percent of them infants under six months of age. In India, only 55 percent of babies are exclusively breastfed for six months. Failing to breastfeed according to World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF recommendations amounts to real costs in human life, quality of life, and national economic outcomes.

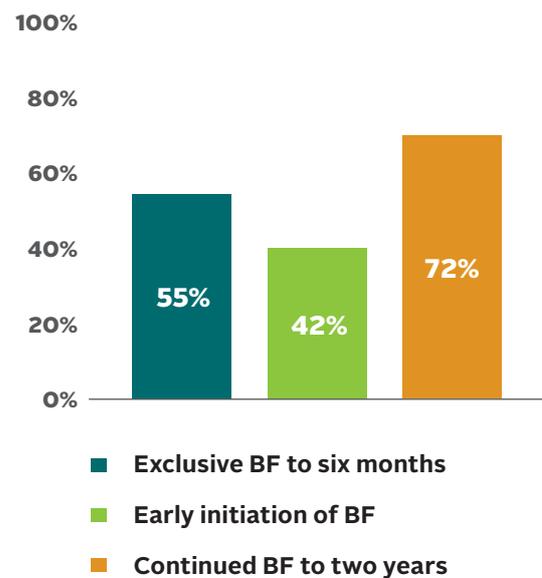
Research completed by Alive & Thrive and published by *Health Policy and Planning Journal* in June 2019 has quantified the economic toll that inadequate breastfeeding takes on individuals, communities, and countries.

Key findings in India

Each year, optimal breastfeeding practices have the potential to:

- Save nearly 100,000 children's lives—an important contribution to reducing under-5 child mortality
- Prevent more than 11,400 maternal deaths from cancers and type II diabetes
- Save over US\$106 million in health system treatment costs related to inadequate breastfeeding
- Generate more than US\$14 billion for the economy, or about 0.7% of India's GNI, by increasing children's cognitive capacity and preventing premature mortality, and reducing the risk of maternal mortality
- Reduce families' out of pocket expenditures to treat diarrhea and pneumonia

Breastfeeding prevalence in India



Source: National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4), 2015-16

What are the costs of not breastfeeding?



Increased vulnerability to disease results in more maternal and child mortality

When children are not exclusively breastfed for the first six months, they are more susceptible to diarrhea and pneumonia—the two leading causes of childhood death worldwide. By supporting mothers to practice recommended breastfeeding practices, nearly 50 percent of under-two child deaths caused by diarrhea and pneumonia could be prevented. In India, this equates to nearly **100,000 preventable deaths** of children under age 2 per year.

Breastfeeding also helps protect the health of mothers. A mother's risk of developing invasive breast cancer decreases by six percent for every year she breastfeeds. Increased breastfeeding rates in India could prevent more than **11,400 maternal deaths** from cancers and type II diabetes each year.



Health care costs to treat children and mothers

Inadequate breastfeeding leads to a higher number of cases of childhood and maternal disease, which cause a higher burden on a health care system. The current cost to the health care system for the treatment of children with diarrhea and pneumonia and type II diabetes in mothers that visit a health facility due to inadequate breastfeeding is estimated to be more than **US\$106 million a year**. This cost could rise dramatically as the health system costs increase, but it could also be reduced with increased breastfeeding practices.



Cognitive losses result in lost wages for individuals

Inadequate breastfeeding impacts a child's ability to learn and consequently hinders their future earning potential. India stands to lose more than **US\$7 billion a year** due to future cognitive losses.



Indirect costs to treat diseases result in significant costs for families

When children become ill due to diarrhea and pneumonia caused by inadequate breastfeeding, parents often incur costs to take them to a health care facility to seek treatment. The economic losses that result include lost productivity and transportation costs. Studies from a range of countries indicate that families can incur additional lost work and transportation costs up to **25 percent of the health care treatment** of diarrhea and pneumonia.



Formula costs are significant and reduce a family's disposable income

As India's economy grows, it attracts greater marketing and investment from companies who sell breastmilk substitute products. The cost of formula feeding a child from 0-23 months is equivalent to **19.4% of a worker's nominal wage**—compared to breastmilk, which is free, safe, and hygienic for all babies. Given the context of poverty in India, families could certainly find more productive ways to spend their income.

Policymakers must invest in national policies and programs to support breastfeeding

Investing in breastfeeding is an investment in not only improving the lives of children and mothers, but also an investment in India's economic future. Greater political commitment is needed to support women to breastfeed, make breastfeeding the new norm, and realize a wealth of benefits for children, families, and societies alike. The Global Breastfeeding Collective calls upon policymakers to quickly adopt, strengthen, and implement the following actions:

1. **Increase funding** to raise breastfeeding rates from birth through two years.
2. Fully implement the Infant Milk Substitute (IMS) Act through **strong legal measures that are enforced and independently monitored** by organizations free from conflicts of interest.
3. **Enact paid family leave and workplace breastfeeding policies**, building on the International Labour Organization's maternity protection guidelines as a minimum requirement, including provisions for the informal sector.
4. **Implement the Ten Steps to Successful Breastfeeding in maternity facilities**, including providing breastmilk for sick and vulnerable newborns.
5. **Improve access to skilled breastfeeding counseling** as part of comprehensive breastfeeding policies and programs in health facilities.
6. **Strengthen links between health facilities and communities**, and encourage community networks that protect, promote, and support breastfeeding.
7. **Strengthen monitoring systems that track the progress** of policies, programs, and funding towards achieving both national and global breastfeeding targets.

The evidence is clear: investing in policies and programs that support mothers to breastfeed saves lives and provides a high return on investment.

Citation

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