Breastfeeding is one of the best buys in global health to save lives and improve the health, social, and economic development of both individuals and for Nigeria as a nation. Every $1 (₦315.25) invested in breastfeeding in low- and middle-income countries can generate as much as $35 (₦11,033.75) in economic returns. Only 24 percent of babies in Nigeria are exclusively breastfed for six months—well below the global target of 50 percent. Breastfeeding not 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.

**Adequate breastfeeding improves human capital development and reduces health expenditures for families and Nigeria**

**Increased vulnerability to disease results in increases in child mortality**

When children are not exclusively breastfed for the first six months and continue to receive breastmilk up to two years, 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 annually compared to a situation with no breastfeeding. In Nigeria, improved breastfeeding practices could save 103,742 children’s lives each year and prevent 1,511 maternal deaths from cancers and type II diabetes each year.

**Health care costs to treat diarrhea and pneumonia could be eliminated**

Inadequate breastfeeding causes over 10 million avoidable cases of childhood diarrhea and pneumonia and 17,628 cases of childhood obesity each year. The current cost to the health care system for the treatment of children with diarrhea and pneumonia that visit a health facility due to inadequate breastfeeding is estimated to be approximately US$22 million (₦6.93 billion) a year. This cost could rise dramatically as the health system coverage of treatment for diarrhea and pneumonia increases but 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. Nigeria stands to lose more than US$9 billion (₦2.84 trillion) a year due to future cognitive losses associated with inadequate breastfeeding.

Indirect costs to health care systems are significant burdens on health resources

When children become ill due to diarrhea and pneumonia caused by inadequate breastfeeding, parents and caregivers often incur costs to take them to seek treatment at a health care facility. Based on estimates from other countries, the economic losses that result from lost productivity and transportation costs could amount to 25 percent of the cost of the health care treatment itself.

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

Economic growth and increasing disposable incomes have attracted companies to market their breastmilk substitute products to mothers to feed their children. The cost to purchase economy brand infant formula can be significant for families compared to breastmilk, which is free, safe, and hygienic for all babies.

Policymakers are essential to the development and implementation of national policies and programs to support breastfeeding

In 2012, the 194 countries of the World Health Assembly (WHA) committed to a target of increasing the global prevalence of exclusive breastfeeding in the first six months of life to at least 50 percent by 2025.

To reach this target—which is also outlined in the National Strategic Plan of Action on Nutrition—and realize the essential health and economic benefits of breastfeeding, Nigeria must invest to scale up breastfeeding at a national level. Policymakers should move quickly to adopt, strengthen, and implement the following policies and programs to support mothers to optimally breastfeed:

- Update and strengthen the International Code of Breast‑milk Substitutes to bring regulations on the marketing of breastmilk substitutes in line with global recommendations, including effective enforcement and monitoring mechanisms.
- Implement the principles of the Abuja Breastfeeding Declaration, including adequate maternity leave and workplace interventions such as lactation rooms.
- Allocate adequate funds for the effective implementation of the National Strategic Plan of Action on Nutrition at the national and state level.
- Strengthen the capacity of health systems to provide support and counseling on infant and young child feeding practices, including the expansion of the Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiative.

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

References


Additional citations include

2. Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey 2013
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7. Ibid.

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