

MEDIA STATEMENT

To: Editors & Health Journalists

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World Breastfeeding Week Commemoration 2022

Pretoria: South Africa joins the global community to commemorate the World Breastfeeding Week (WBW) to highlight the huge benefits that breastfeeding can bring to the health and welfare of babies and benefits to maternal health, focusing on good nutrition, poverty reduction, and food security.

This annual campaign takes place from between 1st and 7th August, and it will be commemorated under the theme: “**Step up for Breastfeeding educate and support**”, which serves as a clarion call for South Africans to protect, promote and support breastfeeding at all levels of society.

The World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) recommend that breastfeeding should be initiated within the first hour after birth, continued exclusively for the first 6 months of life with appropriate, safe and adequate complementary foods at 6 months, and continued up to 2 years or beyond.

Breastfeeding provides a sustainable source of food for infants and young children below 2 years. Breastfeeding provides antibodies and other components that protect children against most common childhood illnesses. This life-saving protection is especially important during pandemics like COVID-19.

Healthcare services aimed at supporting mothers to breastfeed were strained as a result of COVID-19, as many mothers were reluctant to visit health facilities due to fear of being exposed to the pandemic and had a fear to transmit the virus to their infants.

There is no evidence to suggest that COVID-19 can be transmitted through breastmilk. The benefits of breastfeeding far outweigh the risks and new mothers are encouraged to exclusively breastfeed for the first six months of their child’s life and as long as they are able to thereafter. Breastfeeding improves nutrition, managing the double burden of malnutrition, provides food security and promotes optimal growth and cognitive development in children.

The above challenges impact on support for mothers to breastfeed and general breastfeeding rates. Suboptimal breastfeeding can lead to poor health, growth and development and survival of infants, children and mothers. Nearly half of diarrhoea episodes and one third of respiratory infections are due to lack of breastfeeding. Based on the latest South African Demographic Health Survey (SADHS 2016), South Africa is behind with meeting the target to improve exclusive breastfeeding rate with only 32% of children under 6 months breastfed exclusively. The global target for exclusive breastfeeding is 50% by 2025.

Women who breastfeed have a reduced risk of developing chronic diseases such as breast and ovarian cancer, hypertension, and type 2 diabetes. The success or failure of breastfeeding should not be seen solely as the responsibility of the woman. Her ability to breastfeed is very much shaped by the support and the environment in which she lives. Supporting breastfeeding involves many actors and levels.

Thus, women need support from the health service, workplace and community to optimally breastfeed without fear of discrimination. There is an urgent need for education to improve and increase the capacity of all the role-players.

We need to restore breastfeeding support systems to pre-pandemic levels and improve the breastfeeding rates, nutrition and health in both the short-and long-term.

The aggressive marketing by the infant formula industry seeks to undermine breastfeeding. United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) World Health Organisation (WHO) has conducted a multi-country study on the impact of marketing of infant formula on infant feeding decision. South Africa has participated in this study and the findings will be released during World Breastfeeding Week commemoration event scheduled to be held in Gauteng as follows:

Date: 01 Monday, August 2022

Venue: Birchwood Hotel, Boksburg (Gauteng province)

Time: 09h30 – 13h30

The event will be presided over by the Deputy Minister of Health Dr Sibongiseni Dhlomo, and he will use this opportunity to make a call for action by all key stakeholders to Step up for Breastfeeding Protection, Promotion and Support.

For more information about the commemoration event, please visit www.sidebyside.co.za, www.health.gov.za

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