

MEDIA RELEASE

World Breastfeeding Week Celebrated in Ethiopia

ADDIS ABABA - 5 August 2009 – The Ethiopian Federal Ministry of Health, WHO, UNICEF and other partners today joined over 120 countries worldwide to mark World Breastfeeding Week (1-7 August 2009) being celebrated in Ethiopia for the first time.

“Ethiopia is joining the global commemoration of World Breastfeeding Week in recognition of the critical role played by exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of life for child survival and ending hunger and poverty,” said H.E. Dr. Kebede Worku, State Minister of Health.

The global theme this year is **“Breastfeeding – A vital Emergency Response – Are you ready?”** drawing attention to the need for active protection and support of breastfeeding before and during emergencies.

“Breastmilk is the safest, most natural and nutritious food that a mother can provide her baby,” said Ted Chaiban, UNICEF representative to Ethiopia. “Exclusive breastfeeding for six months, initiated within the first hour after birth, is the best start to life that any child can receive.

“Children who are exclusively breastfed from birth to six months, and continuously up to two years with appropriate complimentary foods, grow up to be healthier, smarter and more productive than those who aren’t.”

While breastfeeding is almost universally practiced in Ethiopia, appropriate breastfeeding practices are not always followed.

About one third of babies do not receive breastfeeding within the first hour of birth and only half are exclusively breastfed for 6 months.

Often, infants are not fed with colostrum, the highly nutritious milk a mother produces right after giving birth, as it is considered unclean. These defenseless newborns miss out on the critical immune system boost that the colostrum, which is rich in antibodies, Vitamin A and K and other protective nutrients, provides.

Exclusive breastfeeding tops the table of life-saving interventions for newborns. Babies who do not exclusively breastfeed are six times more likely to die from diarrhea or respiratory infections than babies who do. During the first 6 months, complementary liquids and food given to infants can expose them to infectious diseases, negatively impacting their growth and development.

“The National Nutrition Strategy and its five year Program and the Infant Young Child Feeding strategy are part of the Government’s commitment to improve infant young child feeding practices, the most outstanding being breastfeeding,” said H.E Dr. Kebede Worku. “Health Extension Workers are supporting mothers and families in their kebeles to exclusively breastfeed their children for the first six months, initiate breastfeeding within an hour so that the babies benefit from the highly nutritious first milk known as colostrum.”

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Health extension workers from Oromia and Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples Region gave testimony on how they are supporting mothers and families optimize breastfeeding at the launching event. They highlighted cultural misconceptions and malpractices regarding breastfeeding such as giving goat milk and other traditional herbs before giving breastmilk to the baby thinking that breastmilk is heavy to swallow and gives the baby indigestion.

"Through our advocacy work at the community level we are seeing changes in these traditional practices," said Yewibdar Ketema, health extension worker from Fentale District in Oromia. "Mothers are increasingly adopting exclusive breastfeeding from birth as their preferred method of infant feeding. We need to keep up with this work to reach everyone."

Forty thousand umbrellas conveying messages on breastfeeding are also being distributed to Health Extension Workers and their supervisors as part of the celebrations to spread the word throughout rural Ethiopia.

Renowned Ethiopian singer and mother of two, Zeritu Kebede, is contributing to the celebrations through public service announcements and billboards promoting exclusive breastfeeding.

Throughout Breastfeeding Week, the Federal Ministry of Health, UNICEF and other partners are emphasizing the importance of early initiation of breastfeeding in one hour and exclusive breastfeeding for six months through different media advocacy events including radio and TV spots, billboards, flyers, SMS messages and a televised panel discussion.

About World Breastfeeding Week

World Breastfeeding Week was first celebrated in 1992 and is now observed in over 120 countries by UNICEF and its partners, including the World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action and the World Health Organization. The aim is to promote exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of life. Exclusive breastfeeding yields tremendous health benefits, providing critical nutrients, protection from deadly diseases and fostering growth and development. Continued breastfeeding after six months, for up to two years of age or beyond, combined with safe and appropriate complementary feeding, is the optimal approach to child feeding.

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