

## MEDIA RELEASE

On the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary World Breastfeeding Week, 1-7 August, UNICEF says initiating breastfeeding within one hour of birth could greatly reduce neonatal deaths

August 2007 - Breastfeeding every baby from the first hour of life could prevent a significant number of neonatal deaths in developing countries, UNICEF said today, at the start of World Breastfeeding Week. In South Africa, where two thirds of neonatal deaths are due to low birth weight, keeping babies warm and initiating them early on exclusive breastfeeding could save many of these young lives. In South Africa's mortality profile, children under five have the highest mortality of any age group.

Poor infant feeding practices have been shown to compromise children's chances to survive, especially during the first months of life. Exclusive breastfeeding, if initiated within the first hour of birth and continued for 6 months, could significantly reduce diseases and death in infants.

Although the South African Infant and Young Child feeding guidelines reaffirm the importance of promoting breastfeeding in accomplishment of the Millennium Development Goals, less than one in twenty South African children is exclusively breastfed at 6 months of age.

Additionally, with about 300 000 HIV positive pregnant women giving birth every year in the country, poor feeding practices such as mixing breast milk with other fluids or foods increase the risk of babies acquiring HIV from their infected mothers. UNICEF says this could wipe out the gains being from programmes to prevent mother to child transmission (PMTCT).

Continued breastfeeding after six months, for up to two years of age or beyond, combined with safe and appropriate complementary feeding, is essential to achieve a better nutritional status in young children. But significant challenges remain, including poverty, the health status of the mother and her knowledge of optimal infant feeding.

**World Breastfeeding Week** was first celebrated in 1992 and is now observed in over 120 countries by UNICEF, governments and their partners, including the World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action and the World Health Organization. Its aim is to promote exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of life which yields tremendous health benefits, providing critical nutrients, protection from deadly diseases such as pneumonia and fostering growth and development in the young child.

**This year's theme is breastfeeding within one hour of birth**, a strategy that has proven to reduce neonatal deaths in many developing countries.

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**For media interviews with Macharia Kamau, UNICEF Country Representative or Dr. Ngashi Ngongo, Chief, Health and Nutrition, as from Friday 3 August, please contact: Yvonne Duncan, 27-82-561-3970, [yduncan@unicef.org](mailto:yduncan@unicef.org), or Carmel LeRoux, 27 82 561-0197, [cleroux@unicef.org](mailto:cleroux@unicef.org) <http://www.unicef.org/southafrica>**

## **BREASTFEEDING: MEDIA FACT SHEET**

- UNICEF and other United Nations agencies recommend exclusive breastfeeding for HIV-uninfected women and women of unknown status for the first six months of life, followed by sustained breastfeeding for two years and beyond with the introduction of nutritionally adequate and safe complementary foods at six months.
- UNICEF and other United Nations agencies recommend exclusive breastfeeding for HIV-infected women for the first six months of life unless replacement feeding is acceptable, feasible, affordable, sustainable and safe (AFASS) for them and their infants. All breastfeeding should stop once replacement feeding is AFASS. While such conditions are the norm in northern countries, they are rare in much of the developing world. We also recommend the early initiation of breastfeeding -- preferably within one hour of delivery.
- UNICEF supports continuation of breastfeeding at six months if replacement feeding is still not AFASS, with additional complementary foods, while the mother and infant continue to be assessed regularly. All breastfeeding should stop once a nutritionally adequate and safe diet without breast milk can be provided;
- UNICEF affirms that whatever the feeding decision, health services follow up all HIV-exposed infants regularly, and continue to offer infant feeding counselling and support, particularly at key points when feeding decisions may be reconsidered, such as the time of early infant diagnosis and at six months of age;
- UNICEF works to support strengthening of health systems through greater investment in primary health care services, strengthening infant feeding counselling, training staff, improving infant screening, treatment, care, support and supervision of lactating HIV-positive women and regularly auditing the quality of care provided;
- UNICEF and other United Nations agencies recommend ensuring that continuity of care is provided to HIV-exposed infants and their carers by integrating health cards and information systems, PMTCT, maternal health, child health and reproductive health, continually assessing AFASS, and promoting HIV prevention to all lactating women;
- UNICEF supports harmonization of policies, protocols and guidelines nationally, especially with regard to the supply of formula milk and food parcels.
- The 2005 Declaration on Infant and Young Child feeding reaffirms the importance of promoting breastfeeding in achieving the Millennium Development Goals, in particular, MDG4 child survival.

### **About UNICEF**

*UNICEF is on the ground in more than 150 countries and territories to help children survive and thrive, from early childhood through adolescence. The world's largest provider of vaccines for developing countries, UNICEF supports child health and nutrition, good water and sanitation, quality basic education for all boys and girls, and the protection of children from violence, exploitation, and AIDS. UNICEF is funded entirely by the voluntary contributions of individuals, businesses, foundations and governments.*