

Protecting breastfeeding is a shared responsibility

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Breastfeeding is the recommended, ideal, natural and sustainable food for the healthy growth and development of infants and young children. The recommendation for infants 0 to six months is exclusive breastfeeding (feeding breastmilk only). Unfortunately, South Africa's breastfeeding rates, at all ages, are low. The rate of exclusive breastfeeding in the first six months of life was reported at just 32% at the last national survey in 2016. While that figure falls far short of the World Health Organisation (WHO) global target of 50% by 2025, it signals an improvement over the past years for the country.



The effort to improve breastfeeding rates has shifted from focusing on mostly mothers and health care workers, to looking across our society and identifying all the contact points with mothers and ways that mothers may be discouraged and or even persuaded to give up on breastfeeding their babies. This has led to efforts to include all sectors throughout the healthcare system, the non-profit and community-based organisations, workplace settings and families to unite in protecting breastfeeding and creating a culture where the whole society fully supports breastfeeding mums.

We often don't realise that we may be discouraging breastfeeding and may have little idea of the health impacts on both mothers and babies if exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of life doesn't happen. It's quite another thing though, to answer a call to become a protector of breastfeeding. How do we do this? It starts with understanding the barriers to breastfeeding that many mothers face. Breastfeeding education in South Africa is insufficient and there is often not enough skilled healthcare support for new mothers to help them overcome early challenges. The answer to any sign of a struggle is too often a recommendation to abandon breastfeeding and switch to infant formula products. In an upper-middle income country, this is a move that not only compromises the health of mom and baby but adds a significant household expense impacting on the entire family.



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However, the challenges of breastfeeding exclusively for six months, and ongoing breastfeeding on demand are not limited to our healthcare facilities and services. Key to successful breastfeeding is that moms are empowered to feed their babies anytime and anywhere, which means they need broad-based support across society. Dr Chantell Witten, a Registered Dietitian and spokesperson for [Adsa \(The Association for Dietetics in South Africa\)](#) points out that moms can face

significant roadblocks to breastfeeding their babies even when this delicate process went well for them after the birth of their baby. She says: “Given the many stressors on households, sometimes mothers find themselves in hostile home environments and social circles negative towards breastfeeding. Often influential women in their lives second-guess them or encourage them to feed other foods before their baby is six months old. The need to earn and return to work, puts pressure on moms to give up on breastfeeding. That’s why protecting breastfeeding needs to be a ‘whole of society’ effort to ensure that we have work and social environments that are breastfeeding-friendly.”

Breastfeeding from birth supports the healthy development of babies and plays an important role in prevention of all forms of childhood malnutrition including undernutrition, obesity and micronutrient deficiencies. Breast milk contains antibodies which help protect against many childhood illnesses. The risk of breast and ovarian cancers can also be reduced in women who breastfeed.



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Professor Lisanne du Plessis, a fellow Adsa spokesperson and registered dietitian and nutritionist, makes it easy to understand how we can be a protector of breastfeeding:

- **Partners** can help mothers with the domestic workload as well as the caring of the baby. Getting hands-on with baby bathing, burping, talking, singing and playing is a great support. Doing grocery shopping, helping with food preparation and cleaning of the house creates a supportive environment. Raising children was never supposed to be a one-person job and partners have a major impact on creating a home environment conducive to breastfeeding for optimum mom and baby health.
- **Family and friends** should be cheerleaders for breastfeeding. It makes such a difference to encourage mothers on their journey to provide their babies with the best nutrition. Be aware of supporting breastfeeding moms anytime and anywhere. Even if you didn’t have a positive breastfeeding experience with your baby, make sure you fully encourage the new moms in your social circle.
- **Workplace** support can make a real difference when it comes to maintaining breastfeeding after the end of maternity leave. In South Africa, we have few workplace policies that are designed to create an enabling environment to support breastfeeding mothers, and you can be part of ensuring this happens in your company. Breastfeeding moms who have returned to work are entitled to two 30-minute breaks to express breastmilk. A private room and refrigeration facilities for safely storing their breast milk can provide further support.
- **SA society** needs to be aware of attitudes that discourage breastfeeding, and even shame breastfeeding mothers. Breastfeeding is perfectly natural and should be normalised and championed across SA communities. Do your part to support, promote and protect breastfeeding as a national asset. It makes sense for us to ensure that our breastfeeding moms feel valued for the great choice they are making.

[World Breastfeeding Week](#) runs from 1 to 7 August 2021. In the midst of the global pandemic with our heightened awareness of the importance of health and robust immunity, it is vital to remember that breastmilk is the optimum food for our babies. Nothing compares, it is priceless. Let’s support and encourage moms in those critical hours after birth, continue the support for the first six months of the baby’s life and also over the longer term as they strive to do their best for their children.

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