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## Breastmilk best for baby against Covid-19

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Mothers are advised to initiate or continue breastfeeding while practising good hygiene to help protect their newborns from infections and illness during the Covid19 pandemic, says Unicef as the world marks World Breastfeeding Week this week.



To date, transmission of Covid-19 through breastmilk and breastfeeding has not been detected. The World Health Organization (WHO) and Unicef recommend breastfeeding and applying skin-to-skin contact during feeding even if the mother is suspected or infected with Covid-19. Mothers are also advised to wear a mask, wash their hands and disinfect surfaces regularly during breastfeeding to reduce the risk of transmission.

Evidence suggests that the benefits of breastmilk substantially outweigh the potential risks of transmission and that the antibodies found in breastmilk may help fight against Covid-19 infection, if a baby is exposed.

“Breastfeeding is one of the best ways to ensure child health and survival, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic,” said Kyungsun Kim, Unicef Representative for Thailand.

“Breastmilk is a baby’s first vaccine with all the essential nutrients, antibodies, hormones and antioxidants that help boost their immune system and provide protection against many infections.”

Breastfeeding is vital to a child’s health and development in infancy and later in life. Studies show that breastfed infants have a lower risk of non-communicable diseases as adults and are more likely to have a higher IQ, spend more time in school and have a higher-paying job. Breastfeeding also enhances mother-infant bonding and reduces the mother’s risk of obesity, Type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular diseases and breast and ovarian cancers.

Yet too few children in Thailand are exclusively breastfed within the first six months of life, which is critical for optimal health and development, according to WHO and Unicef. The 2019 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey by the National Statistical Office and Unicef found that only 14% of children were exclusively breastfed during the first six months, a significant drop from 23% in 2016.

With the exclusive breastfeeding rate in Thailand remaining one of the lowest in the region, Unicef calls for the government and businesses to increase investment in promoting and protecting breastfeeding.

Health workers have a critical role in educating and counselling new mothers in breastfeeding as well as ensuring that babies are breastfed within the first hour of life. Health authorities should also strictly enforce the Control of Marketing Promotion of Infant and

Young Child Food Act which bans marketing breastmilk substitutes, including the distribution of product samples at hospitals and online marketing of infant formula that reaches mothers directly.

In addition, family-friendly policies by government and businesses, including affordable childcare, time and a hygienic space for breastfeeding at work and at least 18 weeks of paid maternity as well as paternity leave, should be adopted to support nursing mothers upon their return to work.

“The low breastfeeding rate in Thailand tells us that too many children here are missing the opportunity to have the healthiest start in life, which is why Unicef will continue to advocate for baby-friendly policies and support mothers to exclusively breastfeed,” Kim added.

“This is a wake-up call that mothers need support more than ever before, especially when many services have been disrupted due to the pandemic. To make breastfeeding and its benefits a reality for every mother and child, it will take a firm commitment and effort from her family, employers, healthcare system and the government.”