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Answers

Proper feeding of infants and young children can increase their chances of survival. It can also promote optimal growth and development, especially in the critical window from birth to 2 years of age. Ideally, infants should be breastfed within one hour of birth, breastfed exclusively for the first six months of life and continue to be breastfed up to 2 years of age and beyond. Starting at 6 months, breastfeeding should be combined with safe, age-appropriate feeding of solid, semi-solid and soft foods. An infant that is not exclusively breastfed could be at a substantially greater risk of death from diarrhoea or pneumonia than one who is. Moreover, breastfeeding supports infants’ immune systems and may protect them later in life from chronic conditions such as obesity and diabetes. In addition, breastfeeding protects mothers against certain types of cancer and other health conditions. Adequate feeding from 6 months onwards can prevent undernutrition and decrease the risk of infectious diseases, such as diarrhoea and pneumonia. Yet despite all the potential benefits, only about two fifths of infants 0-5 months of age worldwide are exclusively breastfed, and slightly more than two thirds are introduced to solid foods in a timely manner. Analysis of data on feeding practices among infants and young children highlights the need for accelerated programming in this area. Globally, only 44 per cent of newborns are put to the

breast within the first hour of birth, and only 2 in 5 infants less than 6 months of age are exclusively breastfed. The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends that breastfeeding continues until age 2 and beyond, yet less than two in three young children aged 12–23 months are benefitting from it.

Global estimates for feeding of children aged 6 months to 2 years indicate substantial room for improvement. A little more than two thirds of 6–8 month olds are receiving any solid food at all, and when considering measures of diet quantity and quality, the rates are much lower: only 1 in 2 receive a minimum meal frequency and less than 1 in 3 a minimum diet diversity. Undernutrition is estimated to be associated with 2.7 million child deaths annually or 45% of all child deaths. Infant and young child feeding is a key area to improve child survival and promote healthy growth and development. The first 2 years of a child’s life are particularly important, as optimal nutrition during this period lowers morbidity and mortality, reduces the risk of chronic disease, and fosters better development overall.

Optimal breastfeeding is so critical that it could save the lives of over 820 000 children under the age of 5 years each year.