



## WHY NATIONAL POLICIES SHOULD SUPPORT BREASTFEEDING:

### The Benefits of Breast Milk vs. Infant Formula

***“If a new vaccine became available that could prevent one million or more child deaths a year and that was moreover cheap, safe, administered orally and required no cold chain, it would become an immediate public health imperative. Breastfeeding can do all this and more.”***

*-The Lancet, 1994*

Exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of life is the single most effective intervention for preventing child deaths.<sup>1</sup> Exclusive breastfeeding—breastfeeding only with no additional foods or liquids, including water—can improve a child’s future growth, development, educational achievement, and even economic status.

The World Health Organization estimates that a lack of exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of life contributes to more than one million avoidable child deaths worldwide each year—yet fewer than one in five infants in Viet Nam are exclusively breastfed.<sup>2,3</sup> This is due in part to the aggressive promotion of breast milk substitutes, misperceptions about women’s ability to breastfeed, and mothers who return to work within the first six months after childbirth and stop breastfeeding. Exclusive breastfeeding needs broad support from medical practitioners, policymakers and employers to ensure that mothers have the support and resources they need to make the best feeding choices for our nation’s children.

#### **BREAST MILK HELPS BABIES FIGHT DISEASE AND PROMOTES OPTIMAL HEALTH AND GROWTH**

- Breast milk has both short- and long-term benefits for children. When a baby is born, breast milk is the baby’s first immunization to help fight disease and illness.<sup>4</sup>
- Breastfeeding is one of the most helpful practices a mother can undertake to protect her baby from harmful bacteria and viruses. Infant formula lacks many of the essential qualities present in breast milk, including special antibodies and other bioactive substances that protect children from illness.<sup>3,4</sup>
- Human milk is species-specific and designed to meet the exact needs of human babies. Breast milk is a living substance that changes to meet the growing needs of the child.<sup>4</sup>
- Breastfed babies typically need fewer hospital visits or prescriptions and have a lower risk of infections and diseases, including diarrhea, pneumonia, asthma, ear infections, and lower respiratory infections.<sup>4,5,6</sup> Additionally, not breastfeeding may increase the risk of childhood obesity, types I and II diabetes, hypertension, and cardiovascular disease.<sup>4</sup>
- Breastfeeding is associated with an increase in I.Q. scores and improved school performance. The longer a baby is breastfed, the more likely they are to have better cognitive, linguistic, and motor skills.<sup>7</sup>

## BREASTFEEDING BENEFITS FAMILIES ECONOMICALLY

- Breastfeeding prevents the high costs associated with formula feeding. On average, it costs approximately VND 800,000-1.2 million per month to feed a child with breast milk substitutes. This costs 53-79 percent of an average person's income (VND 18,227,000)—a significant portion of a family's financial resources.<sup>8</sup>
- Due to the health benefits of breastfeeding, families will spend less time and money at the doctor.<sup>9</sup>

## BREASTFEEDING BENEFITS MOTHERS

- Mothers who breastfeed have a lower risk of contracting type II diabetes, breast cancer, ovarian cancer, and postpartum depression. Women who breastfeed are less likely to become anemic and can have higher levels of oxytocin, which can reduce stress.<sup>4, 5, 9</sup>
- Women who breastfeed experience, on average, faster rates of weight loss after giving birth.<sup>4</sup>
- Breastfeeding helps women space their children. Women who exclusively breastfeed do not generally ovulate until at least six months after delivery, but non-lactating women may begin ovulating by six weeks after birth. Research has indicated that if a woman is exclusively breastfeeding during the first six months and has not yet resumed menstruation, the likelihood of pregnancy is less than 2 percent.<sup>10</sup>

## BREAST MILK

Antibodies	
Hormones	
Anti-Viruses	
Anti-Allergies	
Anti-Parasites	
Growth Factors	
Enzymes	FORMULA
Minerals	Minerals
Vitamins	Vitamins
Fat	Fat
DHA/ARA	DHA/ARA
Carbohydrates	Carbohydrates
Protein	Protein
Water	Water

## BREASTFEEDING BENEFITS EMPLOYERS AND SOCIETY

- By exclusively breastfeeding their children for six months, Vietnamese mothers could save the equivalent of VND 11,435,670,000,000 that would otherwise be spent on breast milk substitutes. Presently half that savings is not realized due to low rates of breastfeeding in Viet Nam, which also raises the nation's overall health costs. Each year, an estimated VND 208,300,000,000 is spent addressing illnesses caused by poor infant and child feeding in Viet Nam.<sup>8</sup>
- Exclusive breastfeeding for six months can benefit employers over time, as mothers are less likely to miss work to take care of an ill child. Fewer missed days of work results in a more stable workforce.<sup>11</sup>
- Breastfeeding also provides an essential means of food security for infants and families worldwide, in the event of a natural disaster or economic crisis.<sup>9, 12</sup> In emergencies, breastfeeding can protect babies from diseases contracted through contaminated water supplies and can prevent hypothermia.<sup>5</sup>

## BREAST MILK SUBSTITUTES CAN POSE A THREAT TO A CHILD'S HEALTH

- Breast milk substitutes—cow milk, goat milk and formula—are vulnerable to mixing mistakes, manufacturing errors, and contaminations, which contribute to increases in disease and death.<sup>4</sup>
- Even though powdered formula is made from pasteurized milk, contamination can occur during the later stages of manufacturing. Powdered formula is not actually sterile.<sup>4</sup>
- A non-breastfed infant is over 14 times more likely to die from all causes during the first six months than a breastfed child.<sup>1</sup>

## STRENGTHENING NATIONAL POLICIES AND PROGRAMS THAT SUPPORT BREASTFEEDING WILL CREATE A HEALTHIER VIET NAM

Together, we can support mothers breastfeeding exclusively for six months by:

- Improving implementation and compliance with *Decree 21 on the Trade and Use of Breast Milk Substitutes in Viet Nam*, and supporting efforts to strengthen Decree 21 to match recommendations in the International Code of Marketing of Breast Milk Substitutes.
- Strengthening Viet Nam's maternity leave policy by extending its duration from four to six months and requiring workplaces to support mothers' ability to breastfeed when they return to work.
- Requiring all maternity facilities to implement the 10 Steps to Successful Breastfeeding and become "baby friendly" to ensure that all mothers have access to skilled support to initiate breastfeeding in maternity facilities.
- Requiring all primary health care facilities to provide skilled counseling and support for breastfeeding to ensure that all mothers have access to these services close to their homes.
- Implementing an ongoing, effective communication strategy that reaches all mothers, their families, communities, and employers with action-oriented messages supportive of breastfeeding and addressing the barriers faced in Viet Nam.

For more information on infant and young child feeding, please visit [www.aliveandthrive.org](http://www.aliveandthrive.org), (+84-4) 3573-9066; [www.mattroibetho.vn](http://www.mattroibetho.vn), (+84-4) 3971-7090; and [www.unicef.org/vietnam](http://www.unicef.org/vietnam), (+84-4) 3942-5706.

# There is no substitute for breast milk.

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### Sources

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