

NO alternative to breast feeding for baby

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Breast milk is the most nutritious and safest food for babies from birth in terms of food quality, nutritional value and safety. Breastfeeding alone up to six months after birth will ensure normal growth and health of the baby. After six months of age, breast feeding along with balanced meals cooked at home ensures adequate and proper nutrition for babies. According to the International Convention on the Rights of the Child, access to safe and nutritious food is a child's birthright. In the sixties and seventies, people depended on breast milk. Then for the first six months or more, breast milk was the only food for babies. Then gradually commercial baby food came to the country. Mothers are also affected by alternative baby food.

In the middle of the last century, due to the massive expansion of the powdered milk industry and unethical competition in the market, this only natural food for humans was challenged. In addition to marketing to adults, it also launched mass marketing of pasteurized liquid milk and formula powder for infants as an alternative to breast milk. These marketing activities have become aggressive and unethical at one point. As a result the rate of breastfeeding is greatly reduced. Various types of baby food are now available in the market. Breast milk is the only natural food prescribed for humans. Breastfeeding is a rhythmic natural process that, once stopped, is not only difficult, but sometimes impossible to resume. Somehow, once a baby is weaned from the breast, the baby turns into a consumer of powdered milk. Again, once babies get used to bottles and suckers, they no longer want to drink breast milk. Companies marketing commercial alternatives to breast milk have taken all these factors as business expansion strategies. Therefore, mother's breast milk substitutes are marketing powdered milk by preparing an age-based sequence of the same brand or brand name. That is, once a child is used to brand name milk powder, regardless of his age at that time, once he crosses a certain age limit (six months, twelve months), the same brand of processed milk powder is in the market for him. While this type of strategy is adopted in the marketing of other food products, it is not acceptable in the case of breast milk substitute milk powder. Because as a result of such marketing activities of companies, unnecessary and unreasonable use of products creates health risks at the beginning of life. Infants are deprived of the benefits and maximum nutrition of mother's breast milk. Apart from this, the spread of over-processed milk powder has increased due to parents not having a clear idea about proper food and nutrition of children, lack of confidence about breast milk, lack of supportive environment to continue breastfeeding along with working life. Therefore, it is very important to ensure that children get safe food and maximum nutrition and to regulate the marketing activities of these products to protect the health of children and their mothers.

The World Health Organization and its member countries reached a consensus on these issues in the 34th session held in 1981 and adopted the International Marketing Policy for these products and urged the member countries to formulate laws and regulations in light of the policy. Bangladesh promulgated the Ordinance in 1984 and enacted the Rules in 1993 at the earliest. In order to make the policies made in 1981 more up-to-date and enforceable, the World Health Organization formulated recommendations on the related issues in the following sessions and accordingly called on the member countries to revise and update the laws and regulations. The government repealed earlier ordinances and enacted more compliant laws (2013) and regulations (2017). At present the said laws and regulations are in force. Other 144 member countries of the World Health Organization like Bangladesh have such laws and regulations in force in light of the International Marketing Policy. The World Health Organization published a report in 2022 by reviewing the laws and regulations made in different countries in the light of the International Code of Marketing of Breast-Milk Substitute. In the report, the laws and regulations of all the countries have been audited on the basis of 100 points and it shows that the laws of 34 countries, including Bangladesh, are more compliant, i.e. the score is more than 75. Bangladesh law score is 79. In South Asia, the most compliant Maldives has a law score of 93, Afghanistan 92, India 78 and the middle compliant Pakistan scores 73, Nepal 71 and Sri Lanka 69. But even though there is no such law in Bhutan, there are policies.

Currently, the decrease in breastfeeding rate due to unethical activities of companies all over the world, including Bangladesh, has become a matter of concern all over the world. According to the latest Bangladesh Health and Demographic Survey (2022), the rate of exclusive breastfeeding of children aged 6 (six) months after birth has decreased by 10 percent from 65% to 55% compared to the previous survey. Thirty-two percent of six- to 24-month-old children consumed sugary drinks the previous day, and 40 percent consumed unhealthy foods. In this case, among all the possible reasons identified, one of the most important reasons is the increase in the marketing of breast milk alternative foods. In such a situation, it becomes more relevant to strengthen the enforcement of this law to increase the rate of breast milk donation. In particular, it is necessary to strengthen the enforcement of laws in health service centers engaged in maternal and child health care, media, sales centers and increase the institutional capacity to control marketing in all these areas.

There is no substitute for breast milk - we need to create mass awareness about this. Then there will be more success in this field. Except in a handful of countries, baby food is not advertised anywhere in the world until the age of five. Therefore, in our country, steps should be taken to ensure that no advertisement of baby food is given until the age of five years. Breastfeeding should be included more in the medical curriculum. The topic of breastfeeding should be set in the student's mind in such a way that he follows it wholeheartedly in his professional life. He would consider it a crime. It should also be included in the school curriculum. A mother should learn about breastfeeding from the teenage years. Then it will be ingrained in his life. If she is a mother, she will not feed her baby anything other than breast milk for six months under any circumstances.

There is no substitute for breast milk, schools, colleges, universities should be spread about this. The media, medical community and everyone else should be proactive in enforcing the law. If the public can be involved in the campaign, the purpose will be more successful. According to the existing law, if someone breaks the law, he will be punished with three years of rigorous imprisonment and a fine of five lakh taka. If someone dies after eating baby food of an organization, then the concerned company will be punished with a fine of 50 lakh taka and 10 years imprisonment or both. Everyone including public health nutrition institutions should take initiatives to make mothers aware in rural areas. With the efforts of all concerned, through public awareness, it will be possible to eliminate baby food substitutes for breast milk in the future.

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