

## Breastfeeding - Importance and Challenges

**Mains: GS II** - *Issues Relating to Development and Management of Social Sector/Services relating to Health*

### Why in News?

Recently, India continues to see a drop in exclusive breastfeeding by six months, despite high initiation rates.

### What is breastfeeding?

- **Definition** - Breastfeeding, also called nursing
- It is the process of *feeding a mother's breast milk to her infant*.
- It is done either directly from the breast.
- It is also done by pumping out the milk from the breast and bottle-feeding it to the infant.
- **Status in India** - Only 63.7% of infants meeting World Health Organisation (WHO) guidelines, according to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) -5.
  - India's current systems treat it as optional or supplemental.

### World Breastfeeding Week

- **Celebrated on** - Every year in the *first week of August*.
- **Supported by** - WHO, UNICEF, Ministries of Health and civil society partners around the world.
- **Aim** - To recognize breastfeeding as a powerful foundation for lifelong health, development, and equity.
- **Theme for 2025** - Prioritise Breastfeeding: Build Sustainable Support Systems.

### What are the benefits of breast feeding?

- **For child**



- **For mother**



## What are the challenges in breastfeeding?

- **Physiological barriers** - Latching difficulties, maternal nipple pain and low perceived milk supply are primary causes for early discontinuation.

*In breastfeeding, latching refers to how a baby attaches their mouth to the mother's breast to feed. A good latch involves the baby's mouth covering not just the nipple, but also a portion of the areola (the dark area around the nipple). This allows for effective milk transfer and minimizes discomfort for the mother.*

- **Hormonal issues** - It can inhibit oxytocin -the hormone essential for milk ejection, further complicating feeding.
  - Stress elevates cortisol, which interferes with prolactin-driven milk production.
- **Poor maternal health** - Marginalised mothers especially from tribal, migrant and urban poor communities face compounded challenges of malnutrition, low literacy and poor access to health information.

- **Lack of Maternity leaves** - Women in informal sectors, *lack maternity leave* which inhibits breastfeeding habit.
- **Absence of safe spaces** - There is a insufficiency of safe and secure spaces to feed milk.
- It causes early *weaning*.

**Weaning**, is the process of switching an infant's diet from breast milk or formula to other foods and fluids.

- **Lack of trained staff** - Without trained staff to correct positioning and latch, mothers often stop within weeks.
  - They are not equipped to diagnose a poor latch, assess milk transfer, or identify feeding-related weight faltering.
- **Psychosocial barriers** - It includes lack of support from partner, family and workplace stress.
- **Low compliance** - Although India's Maternity Benefit Act mandates breastfeeding breaks and crèche facilities, compliance is low.

### What can be done to promote breastfeeding?

- **Lactation support** - ASHAs (Accredited Social Health Activist) and ANMs (Auxiliary Nurse Midwife) - play a pivotal role in extending lactation support into communities.
- **Competency-based lactation training** - It provides access to visual tools and referral pathways for unresolved cases.
- **Digital aids** - Growth monitoring charts and helpline access can increase field-level efficacy.
  - **For example**, *Exclusive breastfeeding at 3 and 6 months can be tracked*
- **Structural reforms** - Access to clean, private feeding rooms increase breast feeding duration.
  - Public-private partnerships and CSR-backed infrastructure in factories and informal work hubs could address these gaps.
- **Innovative methods** - We need mobile crèches, lactation pods and peer-led support at the community level.
- **Targeted advocacy** - We need multilingual, audio-visual counselling and incentives embedded in schemes like ,
  - Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVY)
  - Mothers' Absolute Affection (MAA) program
  - Indira Gandhi Matritva Sahyog Yojana (IGMSY)
- **Establishing as right** - Treating breastfeeding as a health right could develop a sense of consciousness among people.
- **Social support** - Attaching local leaders in programme planning can enhance trust and cultural fit.

### What lies ahead?

- The government and health organisations could encourage people to embed lactation

science into everyday healthcare delivery.

- Structured, evidence-based support could be made available at every level hospital, home and workplace.

## Reference

[The Hindu| Structural Reforms to Promote Breastfeeding](#)

