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]

