

# Report reveals the extent of breastfeeding benefits

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BREASTFEEDING BREASTMILK GLOBAL WELLBEING



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An increase in breastfeeding levels worldwide could prevent over 800,000 child deaths and 20,000 deaths from breast cancer every year, a paper published in *The Lancet* has found.

It also reveals that not breastfeeding costs the global economy around \$302bn per year and \$29.5m in the UK alone.

The findings come from the largest and most detailed analysis to quantify levels, trends, and benefits of breastfeeding around the world.

The authors said that, although breastfeeding is one of the most effective preventive health measures for children and mothers, regardless of where they live, it has been overlooked as a critical need for the health of the population.

The paper is an analysis of data from 28 systematic reviews and meta-analyses, of which 22 were commissioned specifically for the two-part series that has been funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Wellcome Trust.

The findings indicated that breastfeeding has dramatic effects on life expectancy, as well as multiple health benefits for children and mothers.

For example, in high-income countries breastfeeding reduces the risk of sudden infant deaths by more than a third, while in low- and middle-income countries about

half of all diarrhoea episodes and a third of respiratory infections could be avoided by breastfeeding.

It might also increase intelligence, and protect against obesity and diabetes in later life. For mothers, longer-duration breastfeeding reduces the risks of breast cancer and ovarian cancer.

Author Professor Cesar Victora from the Federal University of Pelotas in Brazil said: 'There is a widespread misconception that the benefits of breastfeeding only relate to poor countries. Nothing could be further from the truth.'

There was also a strong economic case for investment in promoting breastfeeding, the paper found.

Modelling conducted for the series estimated that global economic losses of lower cognition from not breastfeeding reached a staggering \$302bn in 2012, equivalent to 0.49% of world gross national income.

In high-income countries alone, these losses amounted to \$231.4bn, equivalent to 0.53% of gross national income.

Furthermore, the authors calculated that boosting breastfeeding rates for infants below six months of age to 90% in the US, China and Brazil, and to 45% in the UK would cut treatment costs of common childhood illnesses and save healthcare systems at least \$2.45bn in the US, \$29.5m in the UK, \$223.6m in China, and \$6m in Brazil.

Yet, worldwide rates of breastfeeding are low, particularly in high-income countries. It is under 1% in the UK, which has one of the lowest rates of breastfeeding at 12 months in the world.

Countries can significantly improve breastfeeding practices by scaling up known interventions, policies and programmes that have been identified in the series. These include interventions, such as policy, training and media campaigns.

Powerful political commitment and financial investment is needed to protect, promote and support breastfeeding at all levels – family, community, workplace and government, said the authors.

Additionally, more needs to be done to regulate the multi-billion dollar breastmilk-substitute industry, which undermines breastfeeding as the best feeding practice in early life.

RCM professional policy advisor Janet Fyle said: 'This report underpins and reinforces why breastfeeding is the most appropriate method of providing nutrition for a baby. It also highlights the pressing need to promote and increase the uptake of breastfeeding in the UK and globally.

'It is one of the most important markers of an individual's future health and wellbeing, as it confers important health benefits. This is why health services need to make greater efforts to encourage new mothers to breastfeed and for longer. This can be facilitated through better support, considerate maternity leave and strengthening policies and legislative framework that enables women to breastfeed when out and about.

'Breastfeeding lays the foundations for an individual's future health and wellbeing and brings great benefits for society as a whole in terms of reduced spending on ill health. This also highlights the importance of good postnatal support and access to midwives to give women the help they need to establish and continue breastfeeding.

'In many countries, breastfeeding is also the safest way to feed the baby, as access to clean water for making up powdered milk is often limited or non-existent.

'Governments need to understand the importance of breastfeeding not just to the health of the mother and baby, but to the long-term health of their nation. They should recognise this and commit the resources to improve the situation. This includes challenging and stopping the inappropriate marketing of breastmilk substitutes, particularly in low- and middle-income countries.'

Access the full Series paper 1 and appendix [here](#).

Original article can be found at <https://www.rcm.org.uk/news-views-and-analysis/news/report-reveals-the-extent-of-breastfeeding-benefits>