

HEALTH

Call for more breast-feeding

SOUTH Africa has one of the lowest rates of exclusive breast-feeding (EBF) for infants from 0 to 6 months on the continent.

At a rate of less than 32% in 2016, it is unlikely that the country can meet the World Health Organisation's (WHO) global target of a 70% EBF rate by 2030. In line with international codes, the country has regulations in place to protect breast-feeding, and to limit the formidable marketing powers of infant formula producers. So, what more needs to be done?

Breast milk is the natural, sustainable food for the healthy development of babies and young children. It cannot be replicated by infant feeding formulas. It provides for all the nutritional needs of an infant up to 6 months of age while also conveying immune-boosting antibodies from mother to child.

Breastmilk continues to play vital nutritional and developmental roles

once babies are introduced to age-appropriate complementary foods after 6 months, and therefore the WHO recommends ongoing breast-feeding for two years, and beyond.

According to Unicef, babies who are exclusively breastfed are 14 times more likely to survive to six months of age than those who are formula fed. Breast-feeding can provide protection against many childhood illnesses such as diarrhoea, allergies and middle ear infections. Yet, formula feeding is widely accepted in South Africa, even though it creates a significant financial strain in low income households.

A further concern in the country is that the required hygiene standards in the proper preparation and use of infant formula are impossible to meet in households and communities with no access to clean, running water and lack of consistent access to energy for boiling water and sterilising bottles and utensils.



IN WORLD Breast-Feeding Week this week, we need to create a pro-breast-feeding culture, says dietitian Maria van der Merwe. Science shows that 'breast is best'.

Dietitian Maria van der Merwe, president of the Association for Dietetics in South Africa, says: "We are battling the legacy of the once unfettered marketing, including free giveaways, of infant formula not just to new mothers, but also to the health professionals engaging with them.

"There's still a pervasive, false view

that when it comes to infant health and development, breast-feeding and infant formula are somehow equal, which they are most definitely not. It is uncontested that scientific evidence shows that 'breast is best'.

"We need a whole-society approach and multi-level advocacy if we are to create a pro-breast-feeding culture in South Africa that supports higher rates of EBF, and longer breast-feeding durations once complementary foods have been offered."

Although South Africa has acceptable regulations governing the marketing of infant formula in the country, well-resourced infant formula marketers are adept at finding loopholes. Dr Chantell Witten, from the DST/NRF Centre of Excellence for Food Security at UWC, is one the country's leading breast-feeding advocates, and is passionate about infant nutrition.

She says: "Research has shown that we are not effective enough yet at

attenuating the aggressive influence and interference of the formula industry. They are involved in the training and continuous development of health professionals, sponsoring conferences and putting promotional speakers forward at events.

"They are reaching mothers through social media channels and gathering their data. Marketing tactics are used to present breast-feeding as arduous, to undermine mothers' confidence in their abilities to produce milk, raising insecurities about their bodies and their parenting skills. There's an insidious campaign, flying under the radar of the code that is grooming mothers to formula feed.

"So much of this is playing out in under-regulated digital spaces, and this demands a greater whole-society awareness that breast is best so that you have citizen advocates standing up to support breast-feeding moms." | Association for Dietetics in South Africa (ADSA)