



MAKING EVERY MOTHER AND CHILD COUNT BEGINS WITH ONE BABY AT A TIME

In celebration of World Health Day, April 7, 2005, La Leche League International (LLL) joins the World Health Organization in recognizing the importance of maternal and child health in building strong families, communities, and societies. In its 49 year history, LLL has long stood for breastfeeding as a key contributor to the health and well-being of mothers and children. Breastfeeding, in fact, provides the cornerstone for life-long good health. Consider the following:

- Every minute, 20 children under the age of 5 die—often from preventable and treatable causes. Newborn infants less than a month old are at the greatest risk.¹
- About 99% of maternal and child (under 5) deaths happen in low and middle income countries. Mothers and children from the poorest families are the most likely to die.²
- Malnutrition, caused by not only a lack of access to food but also poor feeding practices and infection, contributes to 60% of all under-five childhood deaths.³

These statistics are dismal—especially to the families who endure the emotional and financial suffering caused by the loss of the mother and/or child, yet they can serve as a call to action for the world community. And while we live in an age of technological advances, we need look no further than the simple, time-tested, readily available, low-cost, and largely untapped resource of human milk to make a major impact on reversing these statistics: *breastfeeding—one child at a time.*

- Exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of life could save at least 1.3 million lives a year—that's about 3,500 children EACH DAY.⁴
- Not only does breastfeeding provide the perfect nutrition for the growing infant, it also provides invaluable immunological protection from a whole host of diseases—including ear infections, allergies, intestinal disorders, meningitis, Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS), diarrhea and pneumonia.⁵



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- The health benefits of breastfeeding extend to the mother as well. Breastfeeding lowers her risk of breast, endometrial, and ovarian cancer, osteoporosis, and postpartum hemorrhaging.^{5,6}
- Breastfeeding acts as a natural child spacer, ensuring that a mother's body has adequate time between children to recover and prepare for future children.
- A woman's ability to nourish her infant through breastfeeding has nothing to do with social status, and provides an equal start to both male and female infants.
- Breastfeeding's impact is felt not only in the poorer countries or low-income families who cannot afford the cost of artificial baby milks or have limited access to clean water and adequate medical care. Even in the most optimal economic setting, artificial breastmilk substitutes significantly compromise the health and well-being of mothers and babies.

As obvious as it would seem that breastfeeding could play a major role in improving health for mother and child, sadly, less than 35% of all infants are exclusively breastfed even for the first four months.⁷ Certainly, there are challenges that exist that keep that statistic low, including the inappropriate marketing of breastmilk substitutes and a general lack of appreciation of the economic value of breastfeeding. Again, these challenges should just reinforce the global call to action as laid out in the *Global Strategy for Infant and Young Child Feeding*, a joint effort developed by WHO and UNICEF. This strategy, in addition to its unwavering support for breastfeeding as the obvious solution to many of the world's nutrition-related problems, also "renewed commitment to continuing joint action consistent with the Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiative, the International Code of Marketing of Breast-Milk Substitutes, and the Innocenti Declaration on the Protection, Promotion and Support of Breastfeeding."⁷

Breastfeeding also has the potential for being a key player in meeting the *Millennium Development Goals*⁸ as set forth by the 2000 meeting of the United Nations Millennium Summit. These important goals recognize the desperate need to improve the health, nutrition, and equality of people of all ages world-wide.

La Leche League International has been doing its part in this effort for nearly a half-century. With over 7,200 active, accredited Leaders in 65 countries, plus over 5,400 trained breastfeeding peer counselors in 35 countries, LLLI provides information and support through group meetings, one-on-one counseling, the Peer Counselor Program, publications in 25 languages, and on-going education in the form of international, regional, national, and local level conferences and seminars. Last year over 3 million people visited the LLLI website, and the LLLI Center for Breastfeeding Information is one of the world's largest professional collections of breastfeeding-related materials.⁹ The strength of LLLI's approach is based on mother-to-mother support—that breastfeeding, though natural, is a learned behavior, best learned by watching other mothers.

*It is a global responsibility to create supportive environments in order that mothers and babies can initiate breastfeeding and continue breastfeeding as they desire. La Leche League International stands ready to continue working towards the goal of **making every mother and child count--through breastfeeding, one baby at a time.***

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