

Advice to parents and caregivers on feeding under 5 children during periods of economic crisis

Scarcity/rising cost of food and fuel may affect the food intake and nutritional quality of the food that is served to a child which can lead to nutritional and growth problems. To prevent these adverse outcomes it is very important for the parents and caregivers to know how to feed their children during these difficult times to preserve their growth and nutrition.

Please note that;

- The children under 5 need only a small quantity of food for proper growth when compared with an older child or an adult.
- There are relatively low cost alternatives to prepare nutritious meals for children (and family).
- Age appropriate breastfeeding continues to be a valuable source of nutrition till 2 years of age and even beyond that age.

Therefore, the health staff should encourage and support parents and caregivers to feed children an adequate number of nutritious but low cost meals which can be prepared with the locally available food items.

The following is to serve as guidance for all public health staff when counseling parents/caregivers on child feeding and nutrition during these critical times of limited food availability so that the negative effects on child growth are minimized. These tips will help ensure at least to some extent the nutritional quality of the food given to children while correcting some common myths related to child nutrition which hinder good nutrition.

Breastmilk

*There is **no need for other milk and dairy foods** if a baby is age appropriately breastfed. In addition formula milk poses health risks for the baby. Further, growing up milks or follow on formulas for children after 1 year of age are not a valuable source of nutrition, in addition to being costly.*

- **Breast milk is the best milk food a baby should have even during these difficult times.**
 - Breast milk will give your child both nutrition and immunity to protect them from infections.
 - If you are breastfeeding still, it is very important to continue to do so.
 - Exclusively breastfeed till six months are completed.
 - Thereafter continue breastfeeding age appropriately for two years or even beyond along with nutritious food; i.e. during second 6 months 3-4 breastfeeds during day time and perhaps once during the night time, after 1 year of age 2-3 times during the day time.
 - **BUT in the extreme situations when the food availability is very limited** the breastfeeding frequency can be increased irrespective of these recommendations as a source of good quality nutrition.

- **Know the correct way to sustain breastfeeding.**
 - **Frequency of breastfeeding during 1st 6 months** of exclusive breastfeeding–
 - Demand feeding (breastfeed whenever the baby demands). Demanding is not crying.
 - Learn to recognize the baby’s cues to show hunger or readiness for a feed (lip smacking, putting the tongue out and searching etc.)
 - **Baby’s signs of hunger have to be identified before it starts crying. When a hungry baby starts crying it may be too late as it is difficult for the crying baby to take the breast properly.** Therefore be vigilant to identify your baby’s hunger cues **early** before the baby gets frustrated and starts crying.
 - **Always remember – there are many reasons for crying. Do not get misled into thinking that a baby cries only because it is hungry. Unfulfilled hunger is just one reason.**
 - **After starting on food from 6 months onwards (complementary food)**
 - Gradually the breastfeeding frequency should become less and the frequency of complementary food should be increased as recommended for age.
 - Breastfeeds will have to be given **after a meal and not before** the meal to make the baby develop a good appetite for the meal.
 - **IMPORTANT – If there are food shortages and as a result recommended number of meals cannot be given, please advise to increase the frequency of breastfeeding.**
 - **Breastfeeding during the night –**
 - **With rising age, the babies tend to sleep for longer intervals. Do not wake the baby up and feed at night.**
 - **In a baby over the age of 6 months frequent milk feeds during the night (and frequent milk feeds during the daytime also) will reduce the baby’s appetite for meals during daytime.**

Healthy, nutritious and low cost food choices

- **Home cooked foods** are the best at all times (more healthy, more nutritious and less expensive)
 - **Give home prepared nutritious food to your child.**
 - Ready to eat food bought from outside are costly. If the children have become dependent on such food items as a result of incorrect feeding practices which endanger their health, enlighten the caregivers that this is a good opportunity to reverse such negative habits.
 - Spend whatever money you have at hand to buy even a small quantity of nutritious food items to be cooked at home- rice, pulses, fish, sprats, “koonisso”, eggs, vegetables, green leaves, fruits, oil and coconut etc. NOT processed packaged food (e.g. biscuits) or junk food, milk products. Try to grow some healthy food items in the home premises as well.
 - **For younger infants** to whom rice is still given as a thick paste it has to be prepared with added fish or sprats/pulses/vegetables etc. For this, whatever is available at the moment in the household can be used.
 - **Older children after about 10-11 months** and especially after one year of age can be fed from the family diet. Prepare the food less hot and salty for the child (after separating the

baby's portion salt and more spices etc. can be added to the rest for the consumption of adults).

- Reduce unnecessary expenditure –formula milk, other milk food, baby rusks, commercial complementary food, imported food items including imported fruits/canned or tinned or packaged food, sweets, junk food, other store bought ready to eat food etc. Money saved for such unnecessary expenses can be utilized to buy nutritious and healthy food even in smaller quantities.

Give priority to children when serving food in the Family.

- **Quantity of food to offer a baby -**

- **Infants and young children need relatively a small quantity of food per meal.**
- **Know the appropriate quantity of food per main meal for your baby and make every possible effort to give this quantity and if this is not possible try to increase the energy density (e.g. by adding some oil, blended/ground scraped coconut....)**

Only a small quantity of food is required to provide a nutritious meal to a child under 5 years of age.

- **Know the appropriate frequency of meals for your baby**

- If food is very limited - try to give at least the recommended number of main meals.
- If Thripasha or an equivalent is available (for under nourished children) give it as snacks.

For a breastfeeding baby –remember to breastfeed at snack times especially if there is no other nutritious food to give.

- **Improve the energy density of baby's food especially if you are unable to give the required amount of food or the recommended number of meals a day –**

- Add a little oil to the baby's food – e.g. coconut oil/ gingelly oil/thick coconut milk/margarine/butter/scraped coconut/ghee/**blended/ground scraped coconut** depending on the availability.
- Always give food in solid form (according to the baby's age, semi solid at 6 months and gradually increasing the thickness). Making the food watery will reduce the energy density of food and therefore to be avoided.

- **Making the food more nutritious for the baby**

Try to add an additional item than what is prepared for the rest of the family to make it more nutritious for the baby – oil, scraped coconut, roasted and powdered sprats, some koonissa, an egg or at least a piece, a piece of fish etc.

- **Roasted powdered sprats** – add a little bit to the meal of the baby. For older children can add at least a few sprats to the child's meal. If limited availability, keep them roasted/fried and reserve for children.
- **Eggs** – eggs (hard boiled/fried) are very nutritious. Whenever possible a whole egg or at least a piece of egg in the baby's main meal or as a snack is a good option.
- **Add green leaves/jack seeds etc. obtained from the home garden** - - green leaves, bread fruit, jack and jack seeds, local fruits, manioc, sweet potatoes, any other yam, kottamba, cashew etc. depending on seasonal/local availability

- **Roasted and powdered seeds/pulses** – cow pea, gram, pea nuts, pumpkin seeds etc. - keep in air tight containers and add to the meal of the child.
- Add several items together to make nutritious curries (e.g. similar to 'hath maluwa') especially when various food items are available in small quantities
- **Practice responsive feeding to get the maximum out of what is fed**
Nurturing care especially during difficult times when food is limited will make the babies grow better when compared with 'limited food without nurturing care'. When the children are not used to responsive feeding from the very beginning of starting on food it may lead to wastage of food due to food refusal in addition to making the meal time troublesome. Therefore, it is important to learn and practice responsive feeding especially during these times.
- **Let the child develop an appetite for nutritious food and give nutritious food in response to the child's hunger cues**
 - Stick to the age appropriate meal frequency (unless advised otherwise for medical reasons).
 - **Space out meals - Observe at least 2 to 2 ½ hours gap between meals**
 - Frequent sugary foods or junk food will be a waste of money and also will kill the child's hunger. Any food given too frequently can make the child not hungry for the recommended meals.
- **Help cultivate good feeding habits –**
Feeding skills –
 - Feed the infants. Help them develop feeding skills from 8-9 months while being fed by an adult (starting with finger food).
 - Parents feeding older children without allowing them even to touch food, is not recommended.
 - Instead, let older children eat by themselves and let them learn good feeding skills under your close supervision and support.
 - Pay attention to the child and exercise patience during meal times.
- Feeding time and place, healthy interactions during meal times –**
 - The baby should have a separate plate and cup etc. and a designated place to sit and have the meal.
 - If possible synchronize the baby's meal times with the family meal time.
 - Make the family sit and eat together without other distractions (TV, mobile phone etc.)
 - Practice positive interactions during meal times (praising good feeding habits such as eating the required amounts, eating a variety of food, self-feeding etc. to encourage feeding)
 - Make meal times interesting by pointing out the colours of food, types, no. of mouthfuls etc.

- **Non-essential food items which are to be avoided**

Avoiding these non-essential food items will improve health and nutrition of your child thus saving your money both short-term and long-term.

- **Sugary food & beverages including cola drinks and malted drinks**
 - Avoid sugary foods (e.g. sweets) as it may cut down the intake of more nutritious food
 - No added sugar during the first year.

- Avoid as much as possible thereafter but it is very much preferable to continue without added sugar even afterwards.
- **Infant and other milk formula (e.g. 1+, 2+)**
 - Not recommended unless in the extreme cases where the mother is not there (e.g. a maternal death) or mother not able to breastfeed at all (e.g. due to chemotherapy).
 - Spending for formula milk is an added burden for you and your family's wellbeing.
 - If breastfeeding at least once a day, increasing the frequency of suckling will increase your breast milk supply.
- **Junk food (e.g. bites, chips)**
 - Avoid junk food, as these will be low in nutrients and unhealthy in addition to being unnecessary expenditure.
- **Ultra processed foods (e.g. biscuits)**
 - Contains high sugar/salt/additives and NOT a healthy and nutritious food item for children - money spent on purchasing such food can be better spent in buying nutritious and healthy food

For further details please refer your child's Child Health and Development Record and the Complementary Feeding booklet issued by the Ministry of Health