



World Health
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Breastfeeding must continue amidst COVID-19

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In observance of Breastfeeding Awareness Month in the Philippines with the theme “**Tulong-Tulong sa Pagpapasuso sa First 1,000 Days!**”, the Department of Health (DOH), The Korean Embassy, World Health Organization (WHO), Korean International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) and the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) jointly appealed to the public to protect, promote, and support the practice of exclusive breastfeeding of infants from birth up to 6 months, and continue breastfeeding with complementary feeding beyond 2 years old especially during the pandemic.

Breastfeeding and a nurturing mother-infant interaction help prevent deadly infections like pneumonia, diarrhea and sepsis, and promote health and development of children. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has made the practice of breastfeeding more challenging as it has taken its toll on many Filipino families’ health.

The DOH and its development partners stress the importance of ensuring that the correct information on health and nutrition reaches Filipino families, especially when health and other community services are themselves disrupted or limited.

“The First 1,000 Days Strategy requires the expansion of our engagement efforts beyond our health workers and health systems. Our partner government agencies, NGOs, CSOs, and mother support groups have shown to be very critical collaborators on government responses on protecting, promoting, and supporting breastfeeding and complementary feeding, especially during the beginning and the height of the pandemic,” said Health Secretary Francisco T. Duque III.

To date, COVID-19 has not been detected in the breastmilk of any mother with confirmed or suspected COVID-19. While researchers continue to conduct tests, it appears unlikely that COVID-19 would be transmitted through breastfeeding or by giving breastmilk that has been expressed by a mother who is confirmed or suspected to have COVID-19.

According to the 2018 Expanded National Nutrition Survey, the percentage of 0-5 months old children who are exclusively-breastfed remains low at 29 percent. With this, Secretary Duque emphasized the importance of continued delivery of breastfeeding and Infant and Young Child Feeding (IYCF) training, counselling, and follow-up services with compliance to minimum public health standards.

“Breastfeeding is the cornerstone of every infant’s survival, nutrition, and development. It allows early and uninterrupted skin-to-skin contact between the mother and her child, and this significantly improves infants’ survival as well as the mother’s well-being. During the COVID-19 pandemic, when health and other essential services are disrupted and limited, we remind mothers to keep their children close and breastfeed them to prevent infection and for their optimal early development. Let us support mothers as they exclusively breastfeed in the first six months of life. The Philippines’ breastfeeding status needs to be improved so we are able to achieve and sustain the exclusive breastfeeding global targets by 70 percent in 2030,” stated Dr. Rabindra Abeyasinghe, WHO Representative to the Philippines.

This year’s theme is a clear call to action for everyone to support mothers and for mothers to exclusively breastfeed their children for the first six months. Thus, the Korean Government firmly stands together with DOH, UNICEF and WHO that breastfeeding must continue amidst COVID-19. Moreover, the Korean Government recognizes the pandemic’s great impact especially to the vulnerable groups that include mothers and children.

“Out of many development cooperation projects that the Korean government has in the Philippines, Korea is particularly proud to contribute to the well-being of Filipino mothers and young children through a KOICA project on Integrated Nutrition and Health Actions for the first 1,000 days of life,” said Korean Ambassador Inchul Kim. This KOICA project, implemented in collaboration with UNICEF in the Philippines since 2018, through improving families’ access to health and nutrition information, including response to the COVID-19 crisis through capacity building, improvement of diagnostic facilities and hospitals, and provision of medical equipment and vehicles for cold chain support.

“During emergencies, breastfeeding remains to be a life-saving intervention, all the more in this time of COVID-19 pandemic,” says UNICEF Country Representative, Ms Oyunsaihan Dendevnorov. “This celebration will virtually bring together families, breastfeeding support groups, advocates and non-

government organizations. It is an event like no other. COVID-19 will not stop us in our continuous advocacy to protect, promote, and support exclusive breastfeeding. In this period of new normal, it also requires new normal approaches and strategies in tackling breastfeeding issues. This joint effort from Philippine Government, Donor Partners and UN Agencies proves to be one.”

Several laws have been enacted by the Philippine Congress to support better nutrition, especially during the first 1000 days of a child’s life, including Republic Act (RA) 11148 or the *Kalusugan at Nutrisyon ng Mag-Nanay* Act, RA 11210 or the Expanded Maternity Leave Act, RA 10028 or the Expanded Breastfeeding Promotion Act, RA10821 or the Children’s Emergency Relief and Protection Act, and Executive Order 51 of 1986, or the Philippine Milk Code.

DOH, WHO, KOICA, and UNICEF call for the firm and continuous enforcement of these laws, particularly the Philippine Milk Code, the strict regulation of milk donation, and the implementation of Essential Infant and Newborn Care (EINC) or “Unang Yakap” during the time of COVID-19.