

PRIORITISE BREASTFEEDING: Create a sustainable support systems

Breastfeeding is one of the most effective ways to ensure a baby's health, development, and survival in the earliest stages of life. It acts as their first vaccine, providing protection against diseases including diarrhoea and pneumonia.

Yet only 48% of infants under six months are exclusively breastfed – well below the World Health Assembly target of 60% by 2030. This gap is due to overlapping challenges faced by new mothers, health workers, and health systems. Millions of mothers do not receive timely, skilled support when they need it most. Only a fifth of countries include infant and young child feeding training for doctors and nurses, meaning most mothers leave hospitals without proper guidance on breastfeeding or introducing complementary feeding. Many health systems remain under-resourced, fragmented, or poorly equipped to deliver consistent, evidence-based breastfeeding support.

Investment in breastfeeding support remains critically low, even though every dollar invested yields \$35 in economic returns.

As we mark World Breastfeeding Week under the theme "Prioritise breastfeeding: Create sustainable support systems", WHO and UNICEF call on governments, health administrators, and partners to:

- Invest in equitable, quality maternal and newborn care, including breastfeeding support;
- Increase national budget allocations for breastfeeding programmes;
- Integrate breastfeeding counselling into all maternal and child health services;
- Equip all health providers with essential breastfeeding skills;
- Strengthen community health systems for ongoing support;
- Enforce the International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes in all health settings.

Strengthening breastfeeding support is a health, moral, and economic imperative.

SOURCE: WORLD HEALTH ORGANISATION



THE IMPORTANCE OF BREASTFEEDING A lifelong investment in health and well-being

STAR HEALTH DESK

World Breastfeeding Week, celebrated annually during the first week of August.

Breastfeeding is one of the most powerful ways to ensure the health and survival of infants, providing crucial nutrients and antibodies that protect against common diseases such as diarrhoea, pneumonia, and infections. But its benefits go far beyond infancy, impacting both the child's long-term health and the mother's well-being. Despite these remarkable benefits, only 48% of infants globally are exclusively breastfed for the first six months, well below the World Health Organisation (WHO) target of 60% by 2030.

Why breastfeeding matters

Breastfeeding is the gold standard in infant nutrition, offering not only essential nutrients but also immune protection that formula milk cannot provide. In the early months of life, breast milk acts as a natural vaccine, offering infants vital protection against infections and diseases that can be life-threatening. The World Health Organisation and UNICEF recommend exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of life to support optimal growth, development, and health.

Moreover, breastfeeding plays a role in reducing healthcare costs, as it lowers the incidence of childhood diseases that often require expensive

treatments and hospitalisations. In the long run, breastfeeding contributes to better cognitive development, which can positively impact a child's educational and social outcomes.

The long-term benefits of breastfeeding

While the immediate benefits for infants are well-documented, breastfeeding also has significant long-term health effects. Children who are breastfed are less likely to develop chronic diseases such as obesity, type 2 diabetes, and cardiovascular issues later in life. These benefits stem from the healthy fats, proteins, and antibodies found in breast milk, which help promote healthy development during the early stages of life.

For mothers, the benefits are just as significant. Breastfeeding has been shown to reduce the risk of postpartum haemorrhage, and women who breastfeed have a lower risk of developing breast and ovarian cancers, type 2 diabetes, and heart disease. Furthermore, breastfeeding helps mothers recover faster from childbirth and contributes to bonding with their newborns, which is crucial for emotional well-being.

The need for support and education

Despite the clear benefits of breastfeeding, many mothers around the world do not receive the support they need to breastfeed successfully. One of the main challenges is

a lack of skilled breastfeeding counselling during the crucial first days and months after birth. Research indicates that only 20% of countries provide training in infant and young child feeding for healthcare providers, meaning many new mothers leave hospitals without essential breastfeeding guidance.

Ensuring that all healthcare workers are properly trained in breastfeeding support is essential for helping mothers navigate the challenges they face. These challenges can range from latching difficulties to returning to work, where mothers may struggle to maintain breastfeeding while balancing their professional responsibilities. Providing ongoing, skilled breastfeeding counselling in hospitals, health clinics, and community settings can help address these issues and ensure that mothers receive the guidance they need to breastfeed successfully.

Breastfeeding offers unmatched health benefits, from protecting babies against disease to promoting lifelong health for both mothers and children. However, to fully realise these benefits, societies must prioritise breastfeeding support through education, skilled counselling, and policies that protect and empower mothers.

By investing in breastfeeding today, we are making a commitment to the health, well-being, and economic prosperity of future generations.

WALKING The simple, effective exercise for everyone

Walking is one of the most accessible and effective forms of exercise, requiring little more than a good pair of shoes. Whether you are a fitness enthusiast or just starting on your journey to better health, walking provides numerous benefits that make it an ideal choice for people of all ages and fitness levels.

This low-impact activity is easy on the joints, making it perfect for those with mobility concerns or beginners looking for a gentle introduction to exercise. A brisk 30-minute walk, done most days of the week, can strengthen your heart, reduce blood pressure, and improve bone health. It is also an excellent way to manage stress, improve your mood, and enhance sleep quality.

One of the best things about walking is its flexibility. You can walk virtually anywhere—whether it is around your neighbourhood, in a park, on a treadmill, or through a mall on a rainy day. You do not need any special equipment, and it is entirely free. As your stamina increases, you can challenge yourself by walking faster, for longer periods, or by adding inclines to engage your muscles further.

Though walking does not specifically target areas like your core or arms, it is highly effective for toning the legs and strengthening the glutes. For those looking to add variety, walking clubs or family walks after dinner provide social engagement and added motivation.

Overall, walking is an easy, convenient, and highly beneficial exercise that is perfect for anyone looking to improve their physical and mental well-being.



10 early warning signs of kidney problems you should not ignore

Kidneys play a vital role in filtering waste, regulating fluid balance, and maintaining electrolytes in our body. When they fail to function properly, it can lead to serious health issues. Recognising the early warning signs of kidney problems can help prevent further damage. Here are 10 key symptoms that may indicate your kidneys are not working as they should.

- 1. Constant fatigue:** Fatigue is one of the most common early signs of kidney problems. When kidneys are not filtering waste properly, toxins build up in your body, leading to tiredness. Kidney dysfunction also reduces erythropoietin production, which causes anaemia, leaving you feeling weak and unable to concentrate.
- 2. Poor sleep:** Kidney disease is often linked to sleep apnoea, a condition where breathing stops during sleep. Sleep apnoea can worsen kidney function by reducing oxygen levels. On the other hand, kidney disease can lead to fluid buildup in the lungs, causing breathing difficulties and disturbing sleep.
- 3. Itchy skin:** When kidneys cannot remove waste from the blood, it can cause toxins to build up and lead to itchy, dry skin. This can also lead to rashes and other skin problems due to imbalances in minerals and nutrients.
- 4. Swelling in the feet, legs, or face:** Kidney dysfunction can cause fluid retention, leading to swelling, especially in the feet, ankles, legs, and face. Puffy eyes are a common sign that the kidneys are struggling to remove excess fluids from the body.
- 5. Muscle cramps:** Electrolyte imbalances caused by kidney problems can lead to muscle cramps. Your kidneys regulate important minerals like potassium and calcium, and an imbalance in these can affect how your muscles function, causing cramps and discomfort.
- 6. Shortness of breath:** Kidney disease can cause anaemia, leading to low oxygen levels in the blood and feelings of breathlessness. Fluid buildup in the lungs can also make breathing more difficult, especially when lying down.
- 7. Brain fog:** Toxin buildup due to kidney dysfunction can affect brain function. This can lead to confusion, difficulty concentrating, memory problems, or dizziness—symptoms often described as "brain fog".
- 8. Loss of appetite:** Kidney issues can cause nausea and upset your stomach, leading to a reduced appetite. Over time, this can result in weight loss. If you notice you are eating less or feeling nauseous often, it could be related to kidney problems.
- 9. Foul-smelling breath:** When kidneys cannot filter out toxins, it can cause a condition called uremia, which leads to foul-smelling, ammonia-like breath. This occurs because waste products accumulate in the bloodstream, affecting your mouth and taste buds.
- 10. Changes in urine:** Foamy, brown, or bloody urine could be a sign of kidney dysfunction. Foamy urine may indicate protein leakage, while brown or pale urine can point to waste buildup. Blood in the urine can be caused by infections, kidney stones, or other kidney-related issues.

Recognising these early warning signs of kidney problems is critical for timely treatment and prevention of further damage. If you notice any of these symptoms, it is important to seek medical advice immediately. Early intervention can help protect your kidneys and improve your overall health. Never ignore these signs—your kidneys are essential to your well-being.



Can a 'cortisol cocktail' actually reduce stress?

In recent years, the term "cortisol cocktail" has gained attention in wellness circles as a potential remedy for stress. But what exactly is it, and does it really work?

Cortisol is often called the "stress hormone" because it is released by the adrenal glands in response to stress. While it plays a crucial role in the body's fight-or-flight response, chronic stress can lead to elevated cortisol levels, which may contribute to anxiety, weight gain, and even heart disease.

A "cortisol cocktail" typically refers to a blend of ingredients—such as adaptogenic herbs, vitamins, and minerals—that are believed to help regulate cortisol levels and combat the effects of stress. Common ingredients include ashwagandha, rhodiola, magnesium, and B vitamins, all known for their ability to help the body manage stress in different ways. Ashwagandha, for example, is thought to reduce cortisol levels, while magnesium supports muscle relaxation and reduces tension.

While some studies suggest that adaptogens and certain supplements can help manage stress, it is important to note that the concept of a cortisol cocktail is still largely unproven in clinical settings. Many of the ingredients in these blends have shown promise in small-scale studies, but there is no definitive evidence to confirm that combining them in a "cocktail" will have a noticeable impact on cortisol or overall stress levels.

Ultimately, reducing chronic stress is a multifaceted effort that involves proper diet, exercise, sleep, and stress management techniques. While a cortisol cocktail may provide temporary relief, it should not be relied upon as a long-term solution.



Nutrition Begins at the Root

The Daily Star (TDS): How have ACI's high-quality seeds, modern machinery, and crop protection products contributed to improved nutrition outcomes among smallholder farming households? What evidence or farmer feedback supports this?

Dr. F H Ansarey (FHA): ACI's approach to combating malnutrition focuses on biofortified seeds and nutrient-dense crop varieties, alongside mechanisation and safe crop protection methods. ACI dhan1, a short-duration Aman rice enriched with ~24.8 ppm zinc, improves dietary diversity while enabling multiple cropping cycles. Wheat varieties ACI gom1 and gom2, with high yield, protein and gluten content, have proven successful in enhancing both income and food quality for households. Valencia potato, with high dry matter and vitamin C content, has supported farmer profits and household meals.

TDS: Why is it crucial to consider nutrition outcomes at the production stage, and how does ACI ensure that its products and services are accessible, relevant, and beneficial to farmers' health and nutrition?

FHA: For over 60% of rural households, what they grow directly determines what they eat. Traditional agricultural models have prioritised yield over nutritional quality, leading to widespread micronutrient deficiencies. ACI has integrated nutrition goals into its seed and input development to promote diversity, nutrient density, and food safety.

ACI has built a national network of over 4,380 retail points. Products are available in small pack sizes (1g–100g), accompanied by seasonal promotions tailored to low-income farmers. Additional support is provided through mobile agro-clinics, SMS and WhatsApp helplines, and digital advisory services.

TDS: How has ACI adapted its outreach and seed distribution strategies to improve access for remote or underserved communities, particularly in addressing the needs of smallholder farmers?

FHA: ACI has implemented inclusive outreach models, including field demonstrations, school-based nutrition plots, and homestead garden initiatives. Through its partnership with the Suchona Project in Sylhet and



technology bundles such as drip irrigation and early-maturing seeds.

TDS: What evaluation methods does ACI use to assess the impact of its agricultural inputs and support services on nutritional outcomes and sustainable agricultural practices at the community level?

FHA: ACI applies a combination of on-farm trials and Participatory Variety Evaluations (PVEs) to assess local adaptability and food preferences. Additional evaluation methods include surveys, focus group discussions, harvest tracking, and pre-post household

Dr. F H Ansarey
President,
ACI Agribusinesses

surveys measuring dietary diversity and food availability. Feedback is also collected through digital CRM systems and helplines.

Extension efforts are supported through the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE) and local farmer meetings. ACI aligns crop recommendations with agro-ecological zones and connects marginal households to its field and trade channels. Its contract farming and outgrower models have shown promising results in reducing chemical fertiliser use and encouraging organic inputs and mixed cropping.

This content has been published under 'Catalyzing Markets' - a media campaign jointly initiated by iDE and The Daily Star. This interview is conducted by Md. Zahidur Rabbi

iDE, a global nonprofit organisation in 12 countries since 1984, drives poverty reduction through market-driven solutions in Bangladesh, scaling agriculture, WASH, climate resilience, clean energy, and women's empowerment.