

BREASTFEEDING SUPPORT



FOOD FOR
THE HUNGRY

Breastfeeding is an incredibly effective way to ensure child survival and health. Research definitively shows that babies who are exclusively breastfed for the first six months are given the best start in life, with breast milk providing a perfect blend of essential nutrients and protective antibodies. It supports optimal physical, social-emotional, and cognitive development and helps protect against illness and malnutrition.

In later childhood, children who were breastfed perform better on IQ tests, are less likely to be overweight or obese, and are less prone to diabetes as adults. Nursing mothers also benefit. Breastfeeding has been shown to reduce the risk of breast and ovarian cancers in mothers.

Breastfeeding has the most significant impact on child mortality of any preventative intervention. **If optimal breastfeeding was practiced, the lives of an additional 823,000 children under 5 years old, and 20,000 women, could be saved each year.** Steady progress has been made during the past decade. But in spite of this knowledge, in 2021, less than half of infants under six months of age were exclusively breastfed.

FOOD FOR THE HUNGRY'S CARE GROUP SOLUTION

Food for the Hungry (FH) employs an innovative Care Group model, through which community-based volunteers are educated, equipped, and mobilized to become health educators. This method leverages social networks within communities and empowers individuals to educate and engage their neighbors and friends on vital topics, including early and exclusive breastfeeding.

In the context of this Care Group model, FH promotes optimal, evidence-based breastfeeding practices. These include early initiation of breastfeeding (ideally within an hour of birth), exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of life, and continued breastfeeding in tandem with nutritious complementary foods for two years or more.

Mothers who participate in FH breastfeeding Care Groups are taught to recognize their baby's hunger cues and respond appropriately. They are also provided with resources and supported to navigate any limiting social and cultural norms and encouraged to establish enabling environments for exclusive breastfeeding.

Breastfeeding Care Group sessions include breastfeeding basics, responsive breastfeeding, and solutions to overcome common breastfeeding challenges. Lessons, stories, and activities promote discussion and behavior change. One of the strongest indications of success with this model is that participants frequently return to act as Leader Mothers for future Care Groups.

“Care Groups provide a safe environment for women to share their struggles with breastfeeding, practice skills, and troubleshoot common nursing problems, all with the goal of giving babies the best nutrition possible. Newer moms receive help and ideas from more experienced mothers, which creates an environment of mutual support where women learn from one another, trying new practices that support optimal breastfeeding.”

– Karen Calani, FH Senior Technical Advisor, Health and Nutrition

A recent USAID-funded program implemented by Food for the Hungry in the Democratic Republic of the Congo increased exclusive breastfeeding from **44% to 72%.**

ROSE-MARIE'S STORY

Rose-Marie, a 35-year-old mother of three, was born and raised in Mategouasse, a small community in Haiti. A desire for improved health and nutrition for her children led her to be one of the first women to join an FH breastfeeding Care Group in 2015.

“At first, I was a little reluctant about the idea of becoming a Leader Mother in my community. I didn’t see in myself a mother who could influence others,” Rose-Marie shared.

Before joining a Care Group, Rose-Marie was unaware of the benefits of exclusive breastfeeding, and her older two children were frequently sick. A few months after joining a Care Group, Rose-Marie gave birth to her third child, a baby girl.

“Since the very first day of my daughter’s birth, I started to apply all that I learned from the training,” Rose-Marie said. “I breastfed the baby for the first six months and didn’t give her any food or water. I washed my hands before holding or breastfeeding her. It was amazing to see the difference; my baby was stronger and healthier than the others, and she was cheerful all the time!”

Other mothers in the community noticed her daughter’s good health, and began to follow Rose-Marie’s example.



“I can’t even tell you how much I benefited from all the training I’ve received,” Rose-Marie added.

“The groups are a Godsend. My hope is that this activity will reach out to all the mothers throughout the Belladere region.”