

## **‘FEEDING SMART FROM THE START’ – PROVIDING BABIES WITH A FOUNDATION FOR HEALTH, GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT**

With a mounting body of evidence highlighting the short and long-term risks of inadequate childhood nutrition, this year’s National Nutrition Week aims to create awareness on the critical importance of feeding babies ‘smart from the start’.

The programme will run from 9 - 13 October 2011 and aims to educate parents and caregivers on the importance of complementary feeding of babies from the age of six months, by introducing solid foods into their diet in tandem with breast milk.

“Studies show that damage caused by inadequate nutrition to physical growth, brain development and human capital formation during the first two years of a child’s life is extensive and largely irreversible,” said Lynn Moeng, Director of Nutrition at the Department of Health. “Therefore raising awareness of the importance of adequate nutritional intake during this very small window of opportunity is crucial.”

National Nutrition Week is an initiative which has been undertaken annually since 1999 and is planned jointly by the Departments of Health and Education, United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the Association for Dietetics in South Africa (ADSA), the Nutrition Society of Southern Africa, the Consumer Goods Council SA (CGCSA), the Heart and Stroke Foundation, Diabetes SA and The Consumer Education Project of Milk SA (CEP). This year, National Nutrition Week will also involve as partners, United States Agency of International Development (USAID), World Health Organisation (WHO), Family Health International 360 (FHI360), Projects for Assistance in Transition from Homelessness (PATH), Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN) and Johns Hopkins Health and Education in South Africa.

Significant morbidity and mortality and delayed mental and motor development are the immediate consequences of poor nutrition during the formative years, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO). Longer-term impacts include impaired intellectual performance, work capacity, reproductive outcomes and overall health in adolescence and adulthood.

“The 1999 National Food Consumption Survey (NFCS) also showed that most children aged 1- 9 years consume a diet low in energy, with poor protein quality and meagre macronutrient density, and these shortcomings in their early diets compromises their health in the short and the long-term,” Moeng continued. “By raising awareness among parents, prospective parents, caregivers and grandparents about the importance of feeding ‘smart from the start’, we hope to encourage some positive changes.”

The overall message and support messages are:

From six months of age your baby needs breastmilk and solid foods; to promote health, support growth and enhance development. This is called complementary feeding.

- After six months introduce new foods to your baby every few days.

- At six months start with 2 meals a day, with regular breastfeeding. By the age of 10 months your baby should have 5 small meals(including snacks) a day, with continued breastfeeding. Regular small meals / snacks and breastfeeding are recommended until your baby is two years old.
- Wash your hands with soap and water before feeding your baby.
- Keep everything very clean when preparing food for your baby.

“Exclusive demand breastfeeding is recommended for babies from birth until six months of age,” adds Berna Harmse, ADSA president. “No other fluids should be given and solid foods must not be introduced before six months of age.’

“From the age of six months, an infant needs more energy and nutrients than can be provided by breastmilk alone and by this stage, their digestive systems are sufficiently mature to digest a range of foods,” continues Harmse. The campaign will include information on the timing of introducing complementary foods, what types of foods can be introduced, advice on food preparation, frequency of meals and feeding methods as well as messages about the links between health and hygiene.

The importance of the continuation of breastfeeding during the introduction of complementary foods will also be emphasised. “Breast milk is a critical source of nutrients for the young infant and child as it supplies high quality nutrients and protective factors,” said Yolandé van der Riet of the CGCSA’s Food Safety Initiative (FSI) division. “It is vital therefore, that complementary foods have the appropriate nutritional values to compensate for a decrease in the intake of breast milk as the baby grows older.”

Maretha Vermaak, CEP dietitian, reinforces this point saying that breastmilk should remain the main source of milk until the baby is 2 years and older. “Pasteurised cow’s milk can be used from six months in the preparation of complementary foods .”

South Africa has adopted the recommendations of WHO and UNICEF in their Global Strategy on Infant and Young Child feeding (2002), which includes exclusive breastfeeding for six months (180 days) and nutritionally adequate and safe complementary feeding starting from six months with continued breastfeeding up to two years of age or beyond. HIV positive mothers can now breastfeed for 12 months, provided the mother or baby receives antiretroviral medicine. Evidence suggests that universal coverage of optimal breastfeeding could prevent 13% of deaths in children under five years of age globally while appropriate complementary feeding practices would reduce this mortality rate by an additional 6%.

National Nutrition Week has been held annually for over 10 years and is timed to coincide with World Food Day on the 16th of October. For more information, please visit [www.nutritionweek.co.za](http://www.nutritionweek.co.za)

## Ends

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## Fast facts

- Adequate nutritional intake during infancy and early childhood is important for the normal growth and development of young children, as well as enabling them to reach their full potential. (World Health Organization, 2009).
- Malnutrition in children peaks in the age group 6 – 24 months with growth faltering, micronutrient deficiencies and infectious diseases occurring. (Dewey et al, 2008).
- The immediate consequences of poor nutrition during these formative years include significant morbidity; mortality; and delayed mental and motor development. In the long-term, early nutritional deficits are linked to impairments in intellectual performance; work capacity, reproductive outcomes and overall health during adolescence and adulthood. (World Health Organization, 2003).
- Damage to physical growth, brain development and human capital formation that occurs during this period (under two years of age) is extensive and largely irreversible. Interventions to attain and maintain optimal nutrition practices to prevent malnutrition and its long term negative effects must focus on this ‘window of opportunity’. (World Bank, 2006).
- Weight gain in the first two years of life is an important predictor of schooling outcomes. Better schooling predicts better long term health and increased lifetime earnings. (Martorell, 2010).
- 36 countries worldwide account for 90% of all stunted children, South Africa is one of these countries. (The Lancet Series, Maternal and Child Under nutrition, 2008).
- In South African the 2005 National Food Consumption Survey showed that amongst children 1 – 3 years more than one child out of five (23,4%) is stunted and one child out of 10 (11%) are underweight. More than half of these children (64,8%) have a vitamin A and zinc deficiency (51,3%). One child out of five is iron deficient. Children from poor households, especially in rural areas, have the lowest energy and nutrient intakes. (NFCS, 1999 and 2005).

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