

From National Coordinator's Desk

Infants in dilapidated condition

NFHS-III, which was released recently, shows that all is not well on the infant nutrition front. NFHS-III reveals that 23.4% newborns across the country begin breastfeeding within an hour of birth. Although in comparison with NFHS-II, there is a marginal improvement of 7.4% in early initiation of breastfeeding. This figure is abysmally low, given its importance as an intervention for child survival. The better performing states are some of the northeastern states and Goa. The initiation rate in Mizoram is 65.4%, which is highest in the country followed by 59.7% in Goa and 58.6% in Meghalaya. The other states with relatively higher rates of early initiation of breastfeeding are Kerala (55.4%), Tamil Nadu (55.3%), Arunachal Pradesh (55%), Orissa (54.3%), Maharashtra (51.8%), Nagaland (51.5%) and Assam (50.6%). In states like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Jharkhand, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Delhi, it is far below from the level of 40%. Bihar and Uttar Pradesh account lowest, only 4% and 7.2% respectively.



The trend of exclusive breastfeeding for six months is not so impressive either. Only 46.3% children are exclusively breastfed in the country. The rate of exclusively breastfeeding is highest in Chhattisgarh (82%). The other relatively better performing states are Assam (63.1%), Andhra Pradesh (62.7%), Manipur (61.7%), Arunachal Pradesh (60%), West Bengal (58.6%), Karnataka (58%), Jharkhand (57.8%), Kerala (56.2%), Maharashtra (53%), Uttar Pradesh (51.3%) and Orissa (50.2%). The poor performing states are Haryana (16.9%) and Goa (17.7%). Thus, there is still a huge chunk of children in India who are not exclusively breastfed for the first six months of life.

The rate of complementary feeding is somewhat better. The NFHS-III data shows that an average of 55% children are reportedly receiving complementary feeding in the country with Kerala having highest rate (93.6%), Rajasthan is lowest at 38.7%. The NFHS-III data indicates that infants between 6-9 months of age receive complementary diet consisting of solid or semi solid foods along with mother's milk. However, the survey did not ascertain how many mothers continued breastfeeding up to 2 years.

The improvements in NFHS-III nowhere near enough to counter the Infant Mortality Rate (IMR). The IMR which is whopping at the rate of 57 per 1000 live births, a decline of just 11% from its earlier NFHS-II record of 68%. India is still far from the target set by the National Plan of Action for Children and the Millennium Development Goal. Universalization of early initiation of breastfeeding within one hour of birth has the tremendous potential in reducing 31% of neonatal deaths, i.e. about 10% of total child deaths. Together with the universalization of exclusive breastfeeding for six months, the figure becomes even higher. Exclusive breastfeeding goes beyond helping children to survive. It enhances their physical and mental development. Thus, the challenge of improving breastfeeding and optimal IYCF rates is as immense as ever.

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