

Research Brief

July 2023

What can research evidence tell us about:

SUPPORTING MOTHERS TO CONTINUE BREASTFEEDING: CHALLENGES AND POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

Key messages

- According to the World Health Organization, initiation of breastfeeding should be within an hour of birth, exclusively for six months, complemented with solid foods from 6 months of life, and continued breastfeeding for up to 24 months or longer, because it improves the survival of infants. However, multiple challenges are encountered during this period.
- Mothers often face a range of challenges when it comes to breastfeeding. Evidence suggests that the most prevalent difficulties include a lack of support from healthcare systems and family members and a general lack of knowledge about breastfeeding, particularly among first-time mothers.
- To overcome these challenges, we must take intentional steps such as promoting and prioritizing training healthcare workers to educate mothers. We must also boost mothers' understanding of the advantages and best practices of breastfeeding, support families, and urge mothers to seek appropriate assistance from healthcare facilities.

Where did this Rapid Response come from?

This document was created in response to a specific question from a policymaker in Uganda in 2023.

It was prepared by the Center for Rapid Evidence Synthesis (ACRES) at the Uganda country node of the Regional East African Community Health (REACH) Policy Initiative

Included:

- **Key findings** from research
- **Considerations about the relevance** of this research for health system decisions in Uganda

Not included:

- Recommendations
- Detailed descriptions



Summary

Background: It is recommended to initiate breastfeeding within an hour of birth, exclusively breastfeeding from birth until six months of age, and continuing breastfeeding to 24 months or longer, along with providing appropriate and sufficient complementary foods. Breastfeeding benefits infants and promotes their survival. Organizations in Uganda encourage and support breastfeeding practice, but there are often breastfeeding challenges. Breastfeeding mothers need more support than they currently receive. To provide the best care to mothers, Naturally Nourish, sought evidence to present to the Ministry of Health on challenges and solutions breastfeeding mothers encounter. This will aid in advocating for better care during Breastfeeding Week in 2023 and help prevent infant morbidity and mortality.

Question: *What challenges do mothers encounter when breastfeeding, and what possible solutions are available to address these challenges in Uganda?*

Findings: Challenges breastfeeding mothers encounter

Maternal-infant challenges	Support structure-related challenges	Traditional and social belief challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A Mothers work schedule• Breastmilk insufficiency• Concerns about mothers' appearance• Insufficient knowledge and understanding of breastfeeding.• Inadequate maternal nutrition• Perceived discomfort and embarrassment• Persistent crying babies• Infant sickness• Mother sickness• Poor breast health• Poor financial security	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Insufficient support from partners, spouses, and relatives• Inadequate health systems support, and Poor education received from healthcare workers• Inadequate workplace support for breastfeeding mothers• Short and unpaid maternity leave	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Beliefs and social influences• Cultural practices, myths, and misconceptions surrounding breastfeeding.

Possible solutions for challenges breastfeeding mothers face include:

1. Training and retraining healthcare workers is crucial to ensure they provide mothers with the right information for breastfeeding.
2. Mothers need practical advice and information from healthcare workers to improve breastfeeding practices and overcome challenges.
3. Breastfeeding mothers benefit from family support. Husbands, mothers, and helpers can provide emotional and physical help, such as ensuring food supply and reducing the mother's workload.
4. Mothers need to understand the benefits of breastfeeding to stay motivated to continue, despite challenges.
5. Good nutrition is important for breastfeeding mothers to produce enough milk.
6. Flexible work arrangements and on-site nurseries can help working mothers breastfeed while balancing work and motherhood.

Conclusion: Various factors, such as beliefs and social influences, can affect breastfeeding. Implementing multiple strategies is important for success, and we should consider relevant solutions to challenges.

Background

According to the WHO and Uganda's infant and young child feeding (IYCF) guidelines, it is recommended to practice the following: initiating breastfeeding within an hour of birth, exclusively breastfeeding from birth until six months of age, and continuing breastfeeding to 24 months or longer along with providing appropriate and sufficient complementary foods [1].

There are numerous benefits to breastfeeding for both infants and mothers. Exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of an infant's life protects against gastrointestinal infections, not only in developing countries but also in industrialized ones. Starting to breastfeed within the first hour of birth can help protect the newborn from infections and reduce their risk of mortality. Infants who are not breastfed or only partially breastfed are at a higher risk of mortality due to diarrhea and other infections. Breast milk is also an important source of energy and nutrients for children between the ages of 6-23 months. It can provide more than half of a child's energy needs between 6-12 months and one-third of their energy needs between 12-24 months. In addition, breast milk is critical during times of illness and can reduce mortality rates for malnourished children [2, 3]. However, there are challenges that can hinder the successful implementation of breastfeeding [4, 5].

Several organizations in Uganda, such as Naturally Nourish, the Ministry of Health, UNICEF, PATH, and World Vision, have provided support for the promotion of breastfeeding. These numerous organizations work together to offer substantial aid and resources to nursing mothers, to ensure that they can breastfeed successfully for the recommended period [6].

Naturally Nourish has observed a concerning trend in the inadequate assistance provided to breastfeeding mothers. The current interventions, including counselling, are inadequate to provide the necessary meticulous support required by mothers. Breastfeeding mothers often encounter challenges that require additional attention, but due to daily routines and habitual approaches, they may not receive the necessary support. Additionally, some mothers may not know where to seek assistance.

Naturally Nourish, firmly believes that providing additional support to breastfeeding mothers can be greatly improved by focusing on existing interventions. They know that enhancing the skills of nurses to create a highly skilled lactation support system will effectively enhance the support given to mothers. The unwavering goal here is to ensure that mothers receive the absolute best care and support possible.

How this Rapid Response was prepared

After clarifying the question being asked, we searched for systematic reviews, local or national evidence from Uganda, and other relevant research. The methods used by the SURE Rapid Response Service to find, select and assess research evidence are described here:

www.evipnet.org/sure/rr/methods

To support breastfeeding mothers, Naturally Nourish sought evidence to present to the Ministry of Health on the challenges and solutions breastfeeding mothers face. The evidence presented will aid in advocating for optimal care and support for breastfeeding mothers during the Breastfeeding Week event in 2023. It is crucial for various implementing partners and support groups to join this effort, as it can help prevent infant morbidity and mortality [4].

Research Brief Question:

What are the challenges mothers encounter when breastfeeding and what possible solutions are available to address these challenges in Uganda?

Summary of findings

Breastfeeding presents numerous challenges for mothers. It has been recorded in research that nearly 20% of mothers face challenges while breastfeeding with less than half (36%) of mothers reporting having completed the six months to exclusive breastfeeding [7]. These challenges have been categorized into three main categories, as shown in Table 1: Maternal and infant challenges, Support structure-related challenges, and Traditional and social belief challenges.

Table 1: Challenges mothers face while breastfeeding

Factors	Challenges	Description
Maternal and infant challenges	A Mothers work schedule	It can be challenging for working mothers to sustain breastfeeding due to their demanding schedules. The workload can sometimes be overwhelming, leaving them exhausted and unable to tend to their baby's feeding needs considering they must work to survive [8].
	Breastmilk insufficiency	Mothers commonly encounter a significant hurdle when it comes to achieving breastfeeding, and that is insufficient breast milk production. This concern about the adequacy of their breast milk is a major hindrance to breastfeeding in that, mothers often worry that their children are not receiving enough sustenance and may turn to complementary feeding as a solution even before the weaning. Breastmilk insufficiency is commonly caused by inadequate nutrition of the mother, and psychological issues such as stress, trauma, and exhaustion [7, 9-11].
	Concerns of mothers' appearance	Many mothers, particularly young ones, have expressed concerns about the impact of breastfeeding on their physical appearance. They fear that it may make them less attractive to men. Additionally, some mothers who are HIV-positive have reported experiencing weight loss and fatigue, which they attribute to frequent breastfeeding [8].
	Insufficient knowledge and understanding of breastfeeding	Mothers who breastfeed may not know enough about breastfeeding, causing confusion and affecting their practices. The lack of knowledge regarding the requirements, benefits, and strategies to navigate through different situations such as how to hold the baby and when to feed the baby, are a major hindrance in practicing breastfeeding [7, 10, 12].
	HIV/AIDs	HIV-positive mothers often avoid breastfeeding their babies due to fear of transmitting the virus, leading to less breastfeeding [9, 13].
	Inadequate maternal nutrition	Maintaining a proper diet during breastfeeding is essential to successfully practice breastfeeding. Mothers may experience an insufficiency of breastmilk due to inadequate dieting. This is often secondary to inadequate financial security where a mother cannot afford basic food staffs [8, 10].

	Perceived discomfort and embarrassment	Mothers face challenges when breastfeeding in public due to societal norms and discomfort, leading some to breastfeeding irregularly [8, 11].
	Persistent crying babies	Mothers often become concerned when their babies cry excessively, leading them to believe that their child is hungry and causing them to stop breastfeeding and offer other liquids or foods. Unfortunately, this can occur even during the exclusive breastfeeding period, which can negatively impact the mother's ability to breastfeed [8].
	Infant sickness	Infant sickness can make breastfeeding difficult. Some infants who are unwell may have difficulty latching onto the breast because of their weak jaw muscles and lack of appetite. This prompts mothers to explore alternative feeding options [7, 10, 11].
	Mother sickness	When a mother's health is not optimal, it can hinder breastfeeding. Poor health can make it difficult to continue nursing since body weakness and other body conditions get in the way [7, 10].
	Poor breast health	Mothers often experience breast conditions such as swollen breasts, soreness, cracked skin, and painful nipples. Nipple pain, particularly in the first two weeks or longer of breastfeeding, is a common reason why some mothers introduce alternative foods earlier than planned. Issues concerning poor breast health which might be because of an infection, poor attachment of the baby can greatly impede breastfeeding [8-11].
	Perceptions of breastmilk appearance	Mothers often face obstacles when it comes to breastfeeding, such as concerns about the light color and smell of breast milk. They may question whether light milk is beneficial for their baby and if the smell is indicative of its quality for consumption [8].
	Poor financial security	Breastfeeding mothers often face difficulties in maintaining breastfeeding due to the challenges posed by their financial insecurity. When a mother is faced with financial constraints, it can be difficult for her to provide for herself and fulfill basic household needs. This can be extremely exhausting and stressful, especially considering the weight of her responsibilities [7, 9].
Support structured-related challenges	Insufficient support from partners, spouses, and relatives	Mothers have reported that their husbands are not providing adequate support during the breastfeeding period, such as helping with household tasks. In some cases, husbands have even abandoned their wives, which adds to the stress and difficulty of breastfeeding. This emotional damage can cause the mother to have a negative attitude toward the baby and hence affecting her ability to breastfeed [8, 10, 11]. Breastfeeding can become challenging without adequate family support. Many mothers have shared that lacking support from family members can lead to emotional distress and stress, resulting in negative attitudes towards breastfeeding [8].

	Inadequate health systems support, and Poor education received from health care workers	Breastfeeding can be hindered by several factors, such as inadequate support and poor education from healthcare workers (HCWs) to mothers. Mothers have reported that certain healthcare workers display a negative attitude towards them and may not provide adequate support, particularly if financial resources are lacking. Furthermore, conflicting, outdated, or misleading advice or messages from HCWs can also discourage mothers from breastfeeding. According to some mothers, they were not satisfied with the training, education, and counselling provided by the healthcare workers. [8, 9].
	Inadequate workplace support for breastfeeding mothers	Working mothers struggle to breastfeed due to limited workplace support. Long work hours pose a challenge, and designated facilities for expressing milk are scarce. Some resort to using their offices, storage rooms, or even the restroom for breastfeeding which can be very uncomfortable [8].
	Short and unpaid maternity leave	Many mothers were unable to breastfeed their children sufficiently due to the brevity and lack of compensation during their maternity leave, and the short time period allotted to the leave [8, 14].
Traditional and social belief challenges	Beliefs and social influences	It must be asserted that some mothers hold the belief that breast milk alone is insufficient in fulfilling their baby's hunger. Consequently, they may introduce other foods to their baby's diet hence affecting exclusive breastfeeding for babies under six months [9, 13, 14].
	Cultural practices, myths, and misconceptions surrounding breastfeeding.	Certain cultural and traditional beliefs and myths and misconceptions about breastfeeding have hindered its practice. These include the notion that breast milk becomes contaminated during pregnancy or due to extramarital affairs, giving the baby water, concerns about the effect of burping on the breasts, fear of the evil eye, and adherence to other cultural norms and values [8, 11].

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS TO CHALLENGES FACED WHILE BREASTFEEDING

Breastfeeding is an intricate process that comes with its fair share of challenges. It involves many factors that require multifaceted solutions. Therefore, it demands careful and thorough attention to various issues. Here are some potential solutions for mothers who are breastfeeding:

1. Prioritizing and advocating for the training and retraining of healthcare workers (HCWs) is crucial. Research supports that some HCWs lack the necessary knowledge to effectively promote breastfeeding and empower mothers with breastfeeding fundamentals during the postnatal period. Therefore, it is essential to equip them with the needed skills to do so. Access to the right information to the mothers will deter the possible avoidable hindrances that may impede breastfeeding such as how to hold the baby, how the baby latches onto the breast and breastfeeding the baby on demand [8].
2. Mothers should enhance their knowledge of breastfeeding practices and overcome common challenges by receiving practical advice and information from healthcare workers (HCWs), community health workers or Village Health Teams (VHTs). Adequate reception of such healthcare support and assistance is crucial. It is important for mothers to be well-informed about breastfeeding, which can be achieved through mass campaigns, media coverage, and rallies aimed at promoting awareness of the benefits of breastfeeding. The comprehension of the numerous benefits of breast milk for their babies and knowledge of breastfeeding serves as a critical motivating factor to persist with the practice, irrespective of any hindrances they might encounter [7, 8].
3. Breastfeeding mothers are positively influenced by the support of their family members towards breastfeeding. This support can come from the partner or spouse, relatives, and house helpers, either through ensuring adequate food supply or emotional support and reducing the workload of the new mother so she can attend to the baby and recover. Educating, raising awareness, and informing family members about their role in supporting breastfeeding mothers can significantly improve their attitude towards helping breastfeeding mothers. This can be achieved through awareness campaigns and media coverage on the subject. [8-10].
4. Mothers are advised to maintain proper nutrition during their breastfeeding period to ensure that their breasts produce an adequate supply of milk. Mothers need to ensure they stay well-hydrated and nourished to produce sufficient milk for their babies. Therefore, mothers should be sensitized and educated on foods to adequately nourish themselves in preparation for breastfeeding [8].
5. It is imperative that a mother reveals her HIV status to her family and friends to receive the essential support required for effectively managing her condition. Sharing health conditions with loved ones can help them provide targeted support, rather than keeping it to oneself. This support is critical in guaranteeing her overall well-being, quality of life, and breastfeeding [8, 9]. It is also crucial for governments and local authorities to encourage and establish services that facilitate a supportive environment for mothers with HIV. This would enable them to adhere to their treatment and breastfeed their infants in any setting, at their workplace, community centers, health clinics, or homes [2, 3].
6. Mothers need adequate counseling as breastfeeding poses various challenges depending on their physical condition. Health institutions should establish support systems that provide efficient counseling. Effective counseling encourages breastfeeding and positively influences mothers' attitudes [8, 10].

CONCLUSION

Breastfeeding is a complex topic that can be promoted and hindered by various factors. Although most mothers are aware of the importance of breastfeeding, several beliefs [7, 10], social influences, and maternal-infant factors can affect whether a mother can stick to breastfeeding[8]. To ensure success, it's crucial to implement multiple strategies that work together instead of relying on just one. When addressing different challenges, it's important to consider relevant solutions.

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What is Rapid Response?

Rapid Responses address the needs of policymakers and managers for research evidence that has been appraised and contextualised in a matter of hours or days, if it is going to be of value to them. The Responses address questions about arrangements for organising, financing and governing health systems, and strategies for implementing changes.

ACRES – The Center for Rapid Evidence Synthesis (ACRES) is a center of excellence in delivering timely evidence, building capacity and improving the understanding the effective, efficient and sustainable use of the rapid evidence syntheses for policy making in Africa. ACRES builds on and supports the Evidence-Informed Policy Network (**EVIPNet**) in Africa and the Regional East African Community Health (**REACH**) Policy Initiative (see back page). ACRES is funded by the Hewlett and Flora foundation. <http://bit.do/eNQG6>

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Regional East African Community
Health Policy Initiative

**Regional East African
Community Health Policy
Initiative**



EVIPnet

Glossary

of terms used in this report:

www.evipnet.org/sure/rr/glossary

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This summary was prepared by: Peter Kasadha, Caroline Nakalema, Pastan Lusiba, Perez Kirya, and Ismael Kawooya, Supporting Use of Research Evidence for Policy (SURE Project), Office of the Principal, Plot 24, Wampewo Close, Kampala, Uganda

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For more information contact

Peter Kasadha, Email: pkasadha@acres.or.ug