

POLICY FACTSHEET

Breastfeeding and cancer prevention

The World Cancer Research Fund's Cancer Prevention Recommendations advise mothers to breastfeed their babies as part of everyday life to lower cancer risk¹ and to support living well with and beyond cancer².

This factsheet outlines how this recommendation can be rolled out at a population level. It expands advice in World Cancer Research Fund International's Policy Blueprint for cancer prevention, which combines evidence on cancer risk – our Cancer Prevention Recommendations – with policy advice for population-level prevention.



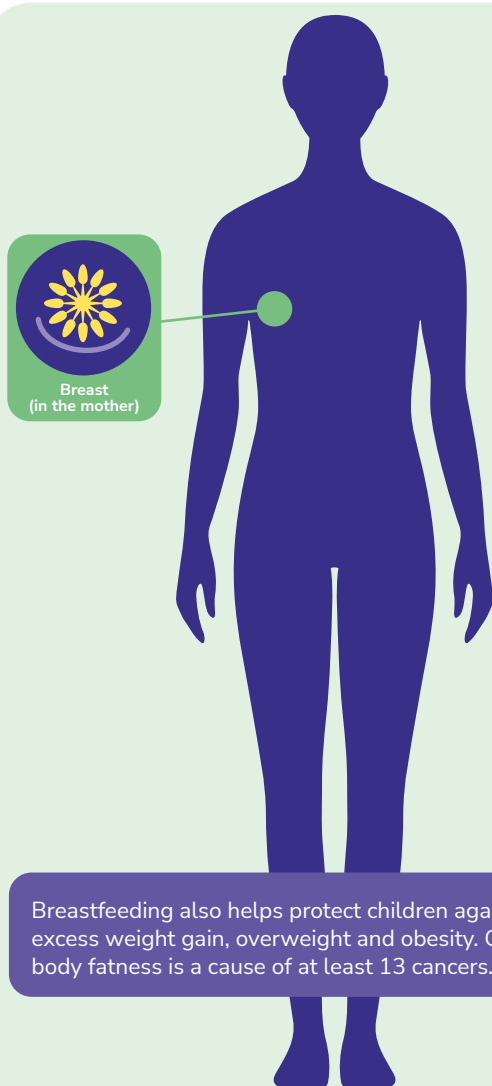
CANCER PREVENTION RECOMMENDATION:

For mothers: Breastfeed your baby if you can

Breastfeeding benefits both mother and baby. Follow World Health Organization advice to exclusively breastfeed for 6 months, then continue up to 2 years or beyond alongside complementary foods

For more details, see: wcrf.org/evidence-for-our-recommendations/breastfeeding

Globally, rates of exclusive breastfeeding in the first 6 months of life have increased by 10 percentage points over the past decade to reach 48% in 2023. The goal is to reach 70% by 2030.³



Breastfeeding also helps protect children against excess weight gain, overweight and obesity. Greater body fatness is a cause of at least 13 cancers.

Breastfeeding and cancer risk

There are 7 key policy areas to support healthy environments that enable breastfeeding:



Marketing restrictions



Active and public transport



Fiscal and legal policies



Effectively inform people



Healthy and safe schools



Counselling in healthcare



Procurement, planning and incentives in communities

Unlocking the co-benefits of cancer prevention policies

Our policy recommendations also have co-benefits in relation to prevention of non-communicable diseases (NCDs), meeting sustainability targets, reversing health inequities, addressing commercial determinants of health and fulfilling human rights. The World Cancer Research Fund International's Policy Blueprint for cancer prevention includes an assessment of co-benefits and potential trade-offs when policy goals do not align.

wcrf.org/blueprint-for-cancer-prevention

Marketing restrictions



- National legislation in line with the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes, including digital marketing of breastmilk substitutes, and subsequent World Health Assembly Resolutions.
- Legislation to end marketing of complementary baby foods with inappropriate health and growth claims on labels so they do not undermine breastfeeding.

Fiscal and legal policies



- Adequate paid parental leave and protection against employment discrimination for parental leave.

Healthy and safe schools and other settings



- Policies to enable breastfeeding on return to work or study.
- Policies that encourage and support women to breastfeed in the workplace and in public (eg nursing breaks, lactation rooms).

Procurement, planning and incentives in communities



- Policies to protect breastfeeding in public.

Active and public transport



- Policies that encourage and support women to breastfeed in public areas such as train stations or parks.

Effectively inform people



- Breastfeeding promotion at population level.

Counselling in healthcare



- Measures to promote, protect and support exclusive breastfeeding for the first 6 months of life, and continued breastfeeding for two years and beyond in conjunction with appropriate complementary foods.
- Counselling on optimal maternal, infant and young child feeding antenatally, immediate breastfeeding support at delivery, and lactation management.

An integrated strategy which together addresses the influence of diet, weight, breastfeeding, physical activity and alcohol consumption will have a greater impact on cancer risk and survivorship than individual factors alone. For more information, visit wcrf.org/blueprint-for-cancer-prevention



Strategies to support our policy recommendations on breastfeeding

- Develop and implement a cross-sectoral strategy to promote, protect and support breastfeeding.
- Breastmilk substitutes should be available for those who need it but should not undermine breastfeeding. Implement comprehensive restrictions on the marketing of breastmilk substitutes, including on digital platforms in line with international guidance.
- Follow international guidance, including the WHO NCD Best Buys⁴, and the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes⁵ and accompanying guidance.

Our other resources for policy-makers, professionals and the general public

Resources for policy-makers

- NOURISHING nutrition policy database policydatabase.wcrf.org
- NOURISHING nutrition policy index for Europe and country snapshots wcrf.org/policy/nutrition-policy



Building Momentum reports:

- Lessons on implementing robust restrictions of food and non-alcoholic beverage marketing to children
- Lessons on implementing a robust front-of-pack food label wcrf.org/policy/our-publications/building-momentum-series



Resources for health professionals and the general public

- wcrf.org/living-well
- aicr.org/resources/media-library
- Resources in Dutch wkof.nl



References

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2. Shams-White MM, Brockton NT, Mitrou P, Kahle LL, Reedy J. The 2018 World Cancer Research Fund/American Institute for Cancer Research (WCRF/AICR) Score and All-Cause, Cancer, and Cardiovascular Disease Mortality Risk: A Longitudinal Analysis in the NIH-AARP Diet and Health Study. *Curr Dev Nutr*. 2022;6(6):nzac096.
3. World Health Organization. Global breastfeeding scorecard, 2023. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2023.
4. World Health Organization. Tackling NCDs: best buys and other recommended interventions for the prevention and control of noncommunicable diseases. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2024.
5. World Health Organization. Guidance on regulatory measures aimed at restricting digital marketing of breast-milk substitutes. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2023.

About us

World Cancer Research Fund International is a leading authority on the links between diet, nutrition, weight and physical activity and cancer. We are an international not-for-profit association that leads and unifies a network of cancer prevention charities, including the American Institute for Cancer Research, World Cancer Research Fund in the UK and Wereld Kanker Onderzoek Fonds in the Netherlands. World Cancer Research Fund International is in official relations with the World Health Organization.

Acknowledgements

For a full list of acknowledgements please scan the QR code.



World Cancer Research Fund International,
Upper Ground Floor, 140 Pentonville Road,
London N1 9FW

Email policy@wcrf.org

wcrf.org

f facebook.com/WoCRF

X X.com/wcrfint

in linkedin.com/company/wcrf

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