

Join La Leche League International and the
World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action
In Celebration of –

World Health Day, April 7, 2008: Protecting Health from Climate Change

What do an Inuit baby born in the northwest Arctic in northern Alaska and a baby born into the Brazilian Yanomami Tribe near the equator have in common? Safely nourished at his mother's breast, he neither knows nor cares about weather or climate change. And, oblivious as he may be to the growing concern about global climate change, the breastfeeding infant and his mother are doing their part in furthering the goal of this year's World Health Day (WHD) celebration: Protecting Health from Climate Change.

The Problem

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), sponsors of the annual WHD, "Health is one of the areas most affected by climate change—and it is being affected now."

The science is clear. The earth is warming, the warming is accelerating, and human actions are responsible. If current warming trends remain uncontrolled, humanity will face more injury, disease, and death related to natural disasters and heat waves; higher rates of food borne, waterborne, and vector borne illness; and more premature deaths and disease related to air pollution.¹

While it might seem frivolous—and perhaps questionable—to claim that breastfeeding can stem the tide of climate change, it has the potential for slowing the rate of change, as well as lessening its effects on individuals.

Slowing the Rate of Change

How can the simple act of breastfeeding possibly affect something as global as climate change? The answer lies in the fact that breastfeeding is inherently "green"—environmentally friendly.

- No manufacturing plant is required for the production of human milk, and unlike formula manufacture that depletes natural resources, the



very act of removing milk from the breast ensures that more will be created in its place.

- No packaging is required for human milk, thus saving trees needed for labels, and non-renewable resources needed for manufacturing storage containers, bottles, or teats.
- Human milk substitutes—whether they are cow-milk based or soy-based formulas—require heavy use of farmland for feeding, grazing, and harvesting. Not only does this tie up farmland from being used to produce foods that can't be supplied at the breast, but it also leads to serious deforestation and soil erosion problems as well.
- According to a report by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations:
...the livestock sector generates more greenhouse gas emissions [than driving cars] as measured in CO2 equivalent – 18 percent – than transport. It is also a major source of land and water degradation.²
- The mother who breastfeeds her baby is typically menstrual period-free for many months. Not only does this provide help with natural child-spacing (and therefore a slowing of the population growth), but it also saves money, resources, and landfill space needed to produce and ultimately dispose of sanitary protection products.
- Formula preparation in the home requires fuel to heat and sterilize water and containers for storage. This is unnecessarily wasting natural resources (as compared to breastfeeding), and in developing countries where access to water and fuel needed to boil that water for sterilization, reliance on formula can put infants at even greater risk of disease.

Breastfeeding as a Shield against the Health Effects of Climate Change

One effective way a mother can protect her child from the consequences of climate change is by providing nature's protective "suit of armor": *breastfeeding*. Not only do her breasts provide perfect nutrition for strong, growing bodies, but they provide immunological protection from disease and a natural "safe haven" from the rest of the world.

Consider these "Key Messages" from the World Health Day 2008 website:³

- ***The health impacts of climate change will hit the poor the hardest.*** Breastfeeding is a great equalizer: babies born to the poorest of the poor have the same starting point as those born to the richest of the rich. And because poorer families are less likely to have access to affordable, quality health care, this simple start in life is even more crucial.
- ***Traditional public health tools are important components of effective response to climate change.*** Breastfeeding is the ultimate "traditional public health tool."
- ***Cross-sector, interdisciplinary partnerships are necessary to meet this global health threat.*** Every time a mother puts her newborn to her breast, she symbolically links arm-in-arm with every other mother on the planet.
- ***Action must begin now to protect health by applying both adaptation and mitigation.*** The greatest unanswered question concerning climate change is how quickly it will progress. Breastfeeding has the potential for stemming the tide of global climate change. Because breastfeeding provides such a powerful life start, it deserves protection, promotion, and support. A byproduct—and perhaps even afterthought—of this support may well be global environmental protection.

Mother Support—a Key Factor in Affecting Global Climate Change through Breastfeeding

The World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action (WABA) has selected as its theme for World Breastfeeding Week 2008 (August 1-7) *Mother Support: Going for the Gold*—a theme at the heart of La Leche League.⁴

Inspired by the Olympic logo of five interlocking rings, the WABA Action Folder uses rings to suggest Circles of Support that help breastfeeding mothers. The WABA version consists of five interlocking outer rings,

surrounding the women who are at the heart of mother support for breastfeeding. These Circles of Support can help increase breastfeeding rates to make a positive, significant impact on climate change:

- ***Family and Social Network:*** When friends and family accept breastfeeding as the obvious source of nourishment for mind and body, a breastfeeding-friendly "climate" is created.
- ***Health Care:*** Health care professionals who implicitly believe that breastfeeding is simply the next step in the birth process, and who actively support the breastfeeding mother through both health and illness, another safety net of support is created.
- ***Government and Legislation:*** Not only do governing bodies have a global responsibility to slow the rate of climate change, but they play a key role in supporting breastfeeding mothers by creating laws that encourage and support breastfeeding.
- ***Workplace and Employment:*** One of the biggest stumbling blocks to breastfeeding can occur when mothers return to work outside the home. This group's support can make a serious difference in how long she is able to continue.
- ***Response to Crisis and Emergency:*** The mother who breastfeeds her baby has a safe and ready supply of food and comfort through natural disasters caused by global climate change.
- ***Women in the Center:*** Women are not merely passive recipients of breastfeeding support. They actively participate in all the circles, and through their strong voice, breastfeeding rates will rise to make a positive impact on climate change.

Save the Planet—Breastfeed!

Author: Melissa Clark Vickers

References:

1. http://www.who.int/world-health-day/key_messages/en/index.html
2. Livestock a major threat to environment, Food and Agriculture Organization, 11/29/06. <http://www.fao.org/newsroom/en/news/2006/1000448/>
3. http://www.who.int/world-health-day/key_messages/en/index.html
4. <http://www.worldbreastfeedingweek.org/>

For more information, contact:



LLLI at <http://www.llli.org>

WABA at <http://www.waba.org.my/>