



## BACKGROUND 3

### **What is the connection between the new WHO Child Growth Standards and infant and young child feeding practices?**

The growth of an infant is strongly linked to how he or she is fed. The nutritional, immunological and growth benefits of breastfeeding have been proven, and so the breastfed infant is the natural standard for physiological growth. The adequacy of human milk to support not only healthy growth but cognitive development and long term health provided a clear rationale for basing the new Standards on breastfed infants.

As a departure, then, from previous growth reference charts used to measure babies and children, the new WHO Child Growth Standards are based on the premise that the breastfed baby is the norm for healthy growth among infants. Until now, existing child growth references were based on infants who were breast and/or artificially fed, but this variable was not controlled for in these early studies.

Because breastfed babies are lean babies, the shape of the curve in the new WHO Child Growth Standards differs from these earlier references, particularly during the first six months of life when growth is rapid.

Additionally, the children selected in the study were fed after the first six months according to guidelines for complementary feeding recommended in the *Global Strategy for Infant and Young Child Feeding*.

### **What is the *Global Strategy for Infant and Young Child Feeding*?**

Infant and young child feeding is a cornerstone of care for childhood development. WHO and UNICEF jointly developed the *Global Strategy for Infant and Young Child Feeding* in 2002 as a guide for countries to develop policies addressing feeding practices and the nutritional status, growth, health, and therefore the very survival, of infants and children.

The Strategy states that breastfeeding is an unequalled way of providing ideal food for the healthy growth and development of infants. It recommends that infants should be exclusively breastfed for the first six months of life to achieve optimal growth, development and health. Thereafter, to meet their evolving nutritional requirements, they should receive adequate and safe complementary foods while breastfeeding continues up to two years or beyond.

Complementary food is the additional food and drink rich in nutrients that is recommended for children at the end of the first six months of life. The transition from exclusive breastfeeding to complementary feeding typically covers the period from 6 to 18-24 months of age, and is a very vulnerable period. It is the time when malnutrition starts in many children. Thus it is essential that infants receive appropriate, adequate and safe complementary foods to ensure the right transition from breastfeeding to the full use of family foods.

The Strategy is based on evidence that nutrition plays a crucial role in the early months and years of life and the importance of appropriate feeding practices in achieving optimal health. Lack of breastfeeding can set up risk factors for ill-health. The life-long impact may include poor school performance, reduced productivity, impaired intellectual and social development, or chronic diseases.

Inadequate infant growth due to poor nutrition leads to under-nutrition in children in many developing countries, which if followed later in life by an increased intake of calories e.g. carbohydrates, fats, etc., could result in overweight or obesity. It is not uncommon to see an under-nourished child in the same

household as an overweight adult. This is becoming known as the 'double burden of malnutrition'. (see backgrounder 4: '*WHO Child Growth Charts and the Double Burden of Malnutrition*')

### **How will the new WHO Child Growth Standards support implementation of the *Global Strategy on Infant and Young Child Feeding*?**

The Standards are a crucial new tool for monitoring infant and child growth and for evaluating efforts to implement the Global Strategy. As such, they provide a means to advocate for protection, promotion and support of breastfeeding and adequate complementary feeding.

Full implementation of the objectives of the Global Strategy will enable supportive environments for mothers to breastfeed their children. The new Child Growth Standards provide the necessary measurement and evaluation tool for parents, caregivers, health practitioners, policymakers and advocates with which to monitor healthy growth, ensure timely screening and treatment, recommend and follow positive nutritional practices.