March 2018

Unicef UK has received a number of queries about the recently published British Society of Paediatric Dentistry (BSPD)’s Position Statement on Infant Feeding. This statement includes the following recommendation:

“From 12 months of age, mothers who wish to continue breastfeeding should work closely with their health practitioners to minimise the potential risk of dental decay. This may include the recording of a detailed diet diary identifying sugar in complementary foods and drinks, and discussing the optimal use of fluoride. Consideration should be given to reducing on demand and night time feeds in light of the emerging evidence-base suggesting a potential link between these practices and complementary feeding after 12 months of age and dental decay.”

The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends exclusive breastfeeding for six months and continued breastfeeding alongside complementary foods for two years and beyond. These recommendations are based on extensive evidence that breastfeeding saves lives and has profound implications for child, maternal and lifelong health. In the UK few babies are fed according to these recommendations, and so a great deal of effort is going into improving mothers’ experience of breastfeeding in order to improve public health. This work is challenging in the UK, as breastfeeding remains a contentious issue, with many seeing it as unnecessary and difficult to achieve. Given this context, we would argue that this BSPD recommendation is unhelpful. Further, while it is acknowledged that there is some evidence that prolonged breastfeeding may be associated with dental decay, this evidence is far from conclusive and little is known about the true causes or mechanisms, while the evidence for the benefits of breastfeeding is irrefutable.

Any guidance for health professionals or parents should make clear the disparity in the evidence base so that informed decisions can be made.

With specific reference to the BSPD recommendation, the following points are for consideration:

- The implication that breastfed babies are particularly vulnerable and require close supervision and extra measures such as keeping a food/drink diary suggests that breastfeeding after 12 months is dangerous. This is misleading, undermines breastfeeding and could cause unnecessary alarm for parents, without conferring any clear advantage to their child.
- Reducing on demand and night time feeds could cause a great deal of distress to both parents and child and could also lead to the early cessation of breastfeeding. These risks, along with the inconclusive nature of the evidence related to dental decay and
the known benefits of breastfeeding, should be discussed with parents to allow them to make informed decisions about what is best for them, their child and family.

The conclusions in the BSPD statement undermine WHO guidelines and cause confusion to health professionals and mothers who, by breastfeeding for longer, are in fact improving the health and wellbeing of their children.

**Further reading**

- The Lancet Breastfeeding Series
- The Impact of Breastfeeding on Maternal and Child Health: Acta Paediatrica
- Impact of Prolonged Breastfeeding on Dental Caries: A Population-Based Birth Cohort Study, 2017
- British Society of Paediatric Dentistry Position Statement on Infant Feeding

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   [http://www.who.int/nutrition/topics/exclusive_breastfeeding/en/](http://www.who.int/nutrition/topics/exclusive_breastfeeding/en/)


23 Durham University Infant Sleep Information Service https://www.dur.ac.uk/sleep.lab/projects/current/isis/