

POSHAN GHAR OP-ED

Every Bite Counts: Nurturing the First 1000 Days of Life

Brief from Poshan Ghar Podcast by Dr. Sameer Pawar, Nutrition Specialist, UNICEF

OCT 27, 2025



During Poshan Maah, the latest edition of the Poshan Ghar podcast features Dr. Sameer Pawar, Nutrition Specialist at UNICEF India. Dr. Pawar shared practical guidance on infant and young child feeding (IYCF). This op-ed summarises points from the podcast, highlighting actionable insights and showing how consistent steps can create a lasting impact on a child's health. You can listen to the full podcast [here](#) ([link](#)).

Dr. Sameer Pawar has spent more than two decades working to improve the health and nutrition of mothers and children across India. He is currently working as a Nutrition Specialist for UNICEF India Country Office based in New Delhi, supporting national-level nutrition programmes.

The Beginning of Life: Breastfeeding and Early Nutrition

Good nutrition starts in the womb, but once a child is born, feeding becomes the primary source of sustenance and immunity. The term IYCF covers every child from birth till the second birthday (first 1000 days of life), and these two years are the most sensitive period for growth, brain development, and health.

There are four IYCF golden practices that every family should remember

1. Begin breastfeeding within one hour of birth.
2. Continue exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months—no water or liquids.
3. Introduce complementary foods at six months while continuing breastfeeding.
4. Continue breastfeeding until the child reaches two years.

Following these practices gives children the best chance of survival, healthy growth, and lifelong strength.



Image: UNICEF

The Science and Magic of Breast Milk

Breast milk is nature's tailor-made food. The very first milk that comes right after birth, colostrum, is thick, golden-yellow, and extremely rich in antibodies, blood cells, and Vitamin A. It protects the newborn from infections, helps intestines mature, and even assists in clearing out meconium, i.e. the black stool. On the first day, a baby's stomach holds only about five millilitres—size of a cherry. By the third day, it holds around twenty millilitres, and by the seventh, about forty. Colostrum's concentrated composition matches this capacity perfectly.

As feeding continues, foremilk (light and watery in nature) hydrates the baby, and hindmilk (thick and creamy in nature) provides fat and energy for growth. Babies to feed long enough from one breast before switching ensures that both. Breast milk adapts to the needs of preterm babies as well. It is clean, digestible, safe, and always at the right temperature.



Image: UNICEF/UN0321968/Kolari

Breastfeeding benefits mothers as well as babies. It helps the uterus contract, reduces cancer risks, guards against osteoporosis and bone loss, and aids postpartum recovery. Public health gains are significant: timely breastfeeding reduce neonatal deaths by 22%, while breastfed babies develop healthier metabolisms, stronger brains, and lower risks of obesity and diabetes. Beyond nutrition, it fosters an irreplaceable emotional bond of comfort and security between mother and child.

Breastmilk isn't just a food; it is a connection of comfort and security that no substitute can replace.

Starting Complementary Foods

At six months, breast milk alone no longer meets nutrient requirements for vitamin A, and energy. By this time, the baby's digestive system is also ready for complementary foods. Starting complementary foods before six months increases infections, while delaying beyond seven or eight months risks nutrient deficiencies and slowed growth. Six months is the sweet spot where the baby needs to start solid foods and can handle other foods.

Complementary feeding focuses on four aspects: consistency, frequency, and variety.

- **Consistency** - Serve thick, energy-dense foods instead of watery ones. Between six and nine months, offer mashed and soft foods. The test is simple: when you put the food on a spoon and tilt it, it should not slide off in a blob. If it stays, it's the right thickness. Thick foods are energy-dense and fill the small stomach better. From nine to twelve months, allow babies to practice eating small, soft pieces using their pincer grip. By one to two years, children can eat the same family foods, cut into smaller pieces.

- **Frequency and quantity** - Babies' stomachs are small (180–200 ml between six and twelve months. Begin with two to three small meals gradually increasing quantity and frequency. By one year, offer half a meal, with one or two healthy snacks. Between one and two years, offer three-quarters of a bowl, five times a day. Avoid salt or sugar; natural foods provide all the needed taste and nutrients. Continue breastfeeding until two years and beyond.
- **Variety** - A child's diet should be as colourful as possible. Out of eight essential food groups: breast milk, grains and roots, pulses and beans, oils and seeds, milk and milk products, meat and fish, eggs, and fruits and vegetables, every meal should ideally include at least five of these. This ensures that the baby gets the right mix of proteins, vitamins, minerals, and fats. A colourful, varied plate nourishes the body and encourages a healthy appetite.



Image: UNICEF

Feeding as a Family Effort

Feeding is more than just providing food; it is a form of connection. Babies hunger through lip-licking, hand-sucking, or turning the head; crying is a sign of distress. Signs of fullness include slowing down, turning away, or closing the mouth. The feeding process should be calm, patient, and playful—a moment of bonding, not a task to be rushed.

Feeding is a shared responsibility, but often it is seen as a mother's responsibility. Fathers, grandparents, and caregivers can support mothers emotionally and practically. Simple appreciation, sharing chores, helping with cooking, or taking turns feeding strengthens the family and models empathy and teamwork. Family participation ensures healthier children and reduces stress on mothers by dispelling myths about child feeding.

To sustain these positive practices, Social and Behaviour Change (SBC) is the heart of every effort to turn knowledge into action by engaging families, communities, and frontline workers together. Information alone is not enough; it requires intention, trust, and shared understanding. Through consistent conversations, community dialogue, and positive role-modelling, SBC helps address myths, shift mindsets, and enable communities to make informed decisions.

The Way Forward

The larger picture is not just about feeding children—it's about shaping future generations. Good nutrition during the first 1000 days of life determines how a child learns, grows, and lives. It influences not only individual health but also the health of families, communities, and the nation.



Image: Open source

The way forward is simple and powerful. Families must treat feeding as a responsibility, not a burden on mothers alone. Communities and health workers must continue spreading the right information, breaking myths, and encourage small, consistent actions. Support systems—from Anganwadi Centres to elders—should work together to ensure no child is left behind in these critical years.

At the heart of it lies awareness and empathy. When families understand that every drop of breast milk, every spoonful of food, and every shared moment of care contributes to lifelong wellbeing, they begin to act differently. Feeding becomes more than just nourishment, but an act of love.

“The first 1,000 days are the foundation for everything that follows. If we feed them right, we nurture the future,” says Dr. Pawar.

Every bite truly counts!

Have stories, insights, or case studies on health, nutrition, WASH, child protection, or social behaviour change? We would love to hear from you. Reach out at arpita.d@zealgrit.com.

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