



australian
breastfeeding
association

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HISTORIC DAY FOR MOTHERS AND BABIES

WHO replaces existing baby weight charts which undermine breastfeeding

The Australian Breastfeeding Association (formerly Nursing Mothers') warmly welcomes new baby growth charts released by the World Health Organisation today, urging all Australian governments and health professionals to adopt them immediately. Existing charts have undermined breastfeeding because they are based on growth patterns of formula fed babies. Health experts believe the old growth charts have contributed to childhood obesity and associated problems like heart disease or diabetes later in life.

Charts used in Australia for decades to advise mothers on optimal size have been biased by the inappropriate growth patterns of formula fed infants, meaning that breastfed infants could be shown as underweight. Research since the 1990s has shown that formula fed babies gain excessive weight, because of their higher energy intake.

Australian Breastfeeding Association (ABA) President Margaret Grove says the new WHO charts were a historic change for mothers and babies. "We have known for over a decade that current weight charts mislead mothers and their health advisors about normal growth. Many mothers were wrongly told their breastfed babies were underweight, and to introduce formula or solids before 6 months."

"Finding out that the current weight charts set excessive growth standards for breastfed babies is small comfort to past generations of mothers - and many who weaned needlessly may feel sad or even angry that they were misled - but now at least they may let go of the guilt", Ms Grove says.

The new WHO charts are based on data from exclusively breastfed babies, which shows what is biologically normal. WHO research involved over 8000 children from 6 countries, brought up in environments where breastfeeding, good diet, and prevention and control of infection prevailed.

Leading Australian pediatrician Dr Gillian Opie, of Melbourne, has backed the ABA call for Australia to change to a growth chart based on breastfed babies. "We simply can't afford to continue practices that promote premature weaning, obesity and later chronic disease," she says.

International infant nutrition researcher Professor Tim Cole of the UK Institute of Child Health at University College in London says the new charts are urgently needed. "During their first year, breastfed babies do not put on as much weight as those fed on formula milk. Breastfed babies are less likely to be fat later in life and to develop complications such as diabetes and heart disease".

This is because breastfed babies self-regulate their energy intake to lower levels and have different metabolic rates and sleeping patterns.

The WHO recommends babies be fed solely on breastmilk up to 6 months of age, with introduction of appropriate complementary foods and continued breastfeeding to 2 years and beyond.

"Latest Australian statistics show only around one in ten babies are getting just breastmilk at 6 months", says Ms Grove.

Australian breastfeeding management expert and historian Virginia Thorley says "the new weight charts are long overdue because of the unnecessary distress caused to many breastfeeding mothers for years.

Because of bad science in compiling the old charts mothers were told their normal babies were not thriving, when the charts were the problem.”

For well known author and lactation consultant Maureen Minchin, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. In her 1985 book *Breastfeeding Matters* she warned that artificial feeding of infants was the biggest uncontrolled experiment in human history. “As the research results from these sort of studies come in”, she says, “we can begin to see the harmful effects of this regrettable experiment on mothers and babies. These new WHO charts are long overdue”.

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