



## **MEDIA STATEMENT**

To: Editors & Health Journalists  
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### **DEPARTMENT REAFFIRMS THE KEY ROLE OF BREASTFEEDING FOR HEALTH AND FOOD SECURITY IN THE CURRENT CONTEXT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

**Pretoria:** South Africa commemorates World Breastfeeding Week (1-7 August), a global campaign to demonstrate sustained commitment to protect, support and promote breastfeeding as a key child survival and cost effective intervention. The country will commemorate this year's campaign under the adapted theme: ***“Support breastfeeding for a healthier South Africa.”***

The 2020 commemoration comes at a time where all countries continue to focus efforts to flatten the curve of the Covid-19 infections. Minister of Health Dr Zweli Mkhize is urging mothers to breastfeed their babies and maintain personal hygiene and disinfect all other breastfeeding items to prevent possible infections.

“We understand that families, mothers and caregivers in particular are anxious and asking themselves whether coronavirus can be passed on through breastmilk and what they can do to protect themselves and their babies.

A baby's immune system is not yet fully developed and requires the immune protection from breastmilk to ensure they grow and develop well, hence mothers are encouraged to breastfeed their babies and routinely clean and disinfect surfaces they have touched,” said Minister Mkhize.

While so far, the Covid-19 virus has not been found in breastmilk and research evidence has shown that virus is not transmitted through breastmilk or by giving breastmilk that has been expressed from a mother who is confirmed/ suspected to have it, all mothers are advised to continue breastfeeding and practice good hygiene by wearing a mask during feeding and wash their hands with soap before and after touching the baby.

The Department will continue with efforts to support and empower mothers and primary caregivers with information on their parenting journey even during these difficult times from pregnancy stage until the child turns 5 years old to thrive, not just survive.

Some of these platforms and interventions include MomConnect (a multi-faceted programme with over 2 million registered mothers, that creates demand for maternal health services as well as improves the supply and quality of those services) and Side-

by-Side (a campaign for pregnant women and caregivers of children younger than 5 years, which uses multiple communication channels).

Breastfeeding can protect your child from many illnesses and conditions such as diarrhoea, chest infections, diabetes, and heart disease amongst others. It is even more important now than ever before during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Decreased or lack of breastfeeding can seriously contribute to poor health, growth and development and survival of infants, children and mothers. Improving breastfeeding practices could save over 820 000 lives a year globally. Nearly half of diarrhoea episodes and one third of respiratory infections are due to lack of breastfeeding.

Based on the latest South African Demographic Health Survey (SADHS 2016), South Africa is behind meeting the global target to improve exclusive breastfeeding rate to 50% by 2025. Exclusive breastfeeding refers to baby consuming breastmilk only for the first 6 months of life. In South Africa, only 32% of children under 6 months are breastfed exclusively.

According to the SADHS 2016, South Africa has an estimated 27.4% of children under the age of five being stunted (low height for a child's age) and 3% wasted (low weight for height). Stunting is a result of chronic undernutrition. Stunting during the first two years of life is particularly damaging, and may be irreversible. Prolonged undernutrition compromises a child's physical and mental development and are at a higher risk of getting diseases like heart disease and diabetes in adulthood.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) recommends that mothers should initiate breastfeeding within the first hour of birth, exclusively breastfeeding for the first six months of life and introduce appropriate, safe, adequate complementary foods from 6 months and continuing to breastfeed for two years or beyond to achieve optimal growth, development and health.

"We urge everyone including partners, healthcare workers, employers, families to create conducive environment for mothers to breastfeed their babies for a healthier South Africa", adds Minister Mkhize.

To access all breastfeeding support resources and information, please visit [www.sidebyside.co.za/resources](http://www.sidebyside.co.za/resources) and join the caregiver community on [www.facebook.com/SidebySideSA/](https://www.facebook.com/SidebySideSA/) for more breastfeeding information or to enter monthly competitions.

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