

An International Code to Protect Breastfeeding

To protect breastfeeding from aggressive business practices that are not committed to children's health, the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes has been approved in 1981 by the UN Member States (except for the U.S.A.) [Complete text of the Code in PDF format](#)

International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes

Developing the Code

The improper and excessive use of breastmilk substitutes since the beginning of the century led many intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations to act.

In October of 1979, the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF, two organizations of the United Nations, held an international meeting on infant and young child feeding. This meeting brought together representatives of governments, medical experts, health officers, representatives of baby food manufacturers, consumer associations and the International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN). One of the recommendations from this meeting was to develop a code to oversee business practices with respect to infant feeding products.

This Code was proposed in its final version at the WHO World Health Assembly in May of 1981 and was approved by an overwhelming majority of 118 votes to one (the negative vote was from the United States).

Objectives of the Code

The purpose of the Code is to promote and to protect breastfeeding, by overseeing marketing practices for infant feeding products.

This Code is a recommendation to governments, who are invited to apply it by legislation or regulation unique to their national situation. It's a minimal requirement, initiating many other actions concerning breastfeeding.

Which products are involved?

The Code applies to all foods presented as potential total or partial breast milk substitutes. According to the WHO's recommendations, babies must be breastfed exclusively for about the 6 first months, then breastfed while receiving supplementary foods up to two years of age or more.

The Code applies to: infant formula (0 to 4 months), follow-up milks (5 months-1 year) and "growth" milks. But also fruit juices, teas and other foods, especially when their mode of administration is the nursing bottle.

The Code also applies to teats and nursing bottles.

Who is involved?

First and foremost, governments and manufacturers. Independently of any legislation, manufacturers and distributors must ensure that their conduct be in accordance with the provisions of the Code. However, the Code is not an obligatory legislative text (there are no penalties for violations).

Health officers, who are frequent and preferential targets of manufacturers' business practices, must know the Code. Certain provisions of the Code concern them specifically.

Summary of the Code

1. No advertising of these products to the general public.
2. No free samples to families or mothers.
3. No promotion of products in health care facilities, including the distribution of free or lost-cost foods.
4. No company mothercraft nurses to contact or to advise mothers.
5. No gifts or personal samples to health workers. Should health officers receive such gifts or samples they are not to give them to mothers.
6. No words or pictures idealizing artificial feeding, including pictures of infants, on the labels of the products.
7. Information provided by manufacturers and distributors to health care workers should be scientific and factual.
8. All information on artificial infant feeding products, including the labels, should explain the benefits of breastfeeding and the costs and hazards associated with artificial feeding.
9. Unsuitable products, such as sweetened condensed milk, should not be promoted for babies.
10. Manufacturers and distributors must follow the provisions of the Code, even though countries have not adopted adequate legislation.

Updating of the Code

Every other year, the World Health Assembly (WHA) takes stock of the international infant feeding situation and reinforces the Code's action through resolutions that governments, manufacturers and health officers must know and follow.

On this site <<http://www.ibfan.org>>, you will find all the resolutions concerning breastfeeding in English. The 49th WHA, in May of 1996, adopted a resolution, which urges:

* to ensure that complementary foods are not marketed for or used in ways that undermine exclusive and sustained breast-feeding. Therefore, as well as to infant formula (0 to 4 months), the Code also applies to: follow-up milks (5 months-1 year) and "growth" milks and to all foods presented as potential total or partial breast milk substitutes.

* to ensure that the financial support for professionals working in infant and young child health does not create conflicts of interest, especially with regard to the WHO/UNICEF Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative.

* to ensure that monitoring the application of the International Code and subsequent relevant resolutions is carried out in a transparent, independent manner, free from commercial influence.

* to ensure that the appropriate measures are taken including health information and education in the context of primary health care, to encourage breast-feeding.

* to ensure that the practices and procedures of their health care systems are consistent with the principles and aims of the International Code of Marketing of Breast-Milk Substitutes.