Around the World, How Long Do Women Breastfeed?
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The World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) recommend that breastfeeding begin within the first hour of delivery, continue exclusively for 6 months and continue for 2 years or more with nutritional and age appropriate complimentary foods after 6 months old. These recommendations are also supported in the United States (US) through Healthy People 2020, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and Baby Friendly Hospital USA. The US breastfeeding statistics are monitored through the "Breastfeeding Report Card," which tracks state and national averages on initiation of breastfeeding, exclusivity at 3 and 6 months and continued breastfeeding at 12 months. Unfortunately, data regarding long term breastfeeding, past the minimum recommendation of 2 years, is not currently being monitored in the US. Currently, 23.8% of US mothers are breastfeeding their 12 month old infants.

The cover photo for the May 21st issue of *Time Magazine* featured Jamie Lynne Grumet, a 26-year-old mother from Los Angeles, California, breastfeeding her 3-year-old son. The cover story was about attachment parenting, which involves various principles including extended breastfeeding, and it sparked controversy across the nation about the appropriateness of nursing toddlers. In the article, Grumet admitted that her own mother nursed her until the age of 6 and she weaned herself. She told *Time* that being breastfed as a child made her feel closer to her mother and that it aided her in developing self-confidence at a young age. News sources, blogs and social networking sites were instantly flooded with stories and reactions to the photograph and the concept of nursing a toddler. While some reactions were positive, there appeared more negative responses to long-term breastfeeding than the overwhelming support for it that is promoted worldwide, which was interesting when taking the current US breastfeeding recommendations into consideration. Some people found this sort of long-term nursing to be a strange concept while others went so far as to insinuate that was a form of child abuse. The fact of the matter is that breastfeeding beyond 2 years of age is completely natural and benefits to mother and child continue or increase with prolonged nursing. These responses indicate that more education and support is needed in this country to promote the health of infants and their mothers through breastfeeding.

UNICEF collects worldwide data on breastfeeding including the same parameters as the CDC for initiation and duration of breastfeeding to 12 months old; however, data on continued breastfeeding to 23 months is also collected by UNICEF. It is interesting to find that 50% of women worldwide are breastfeeding their toddler at 20-23 months. This number truly shows the disparity in breastfeeding when compared to the US statistics of only 23.8% of mothers breastfeeding their 12 month old infants. In India and Rwanda, 77% of women are breastfeeding their 20-23 month old toddlers. Other countries with support for prolonged breastfeeding at 20-23 months include:
· Bangladesh at 89%
· Iran at 58%
· Kenya at 57%
· Pakistan at 55%
· Peru at 47%
· Columbia at 32%
· Venezuela at 31%

There are a number of countries like the US that do not yet collect statistics for prolonged breastfeeding beyond 12 months. One reason could be that initiation and breastfeeding to 6 months are precursors that must be well established prior to attempting to reach these goals. It is clear that breastfeeding initiation and duration worldwide is better than in the US and that there is much work to be done to support initiation, exclusivity and duration of breastfeeding. Promotion of breastfeeding begins with education, continues with support from family, community and nation, and is prolonged when breastfeeding becomes a natural part of our culture.

—Jaclyn Fitzgerald contributed to this article.

References: