

# Breastfeeding can help tackle climate crisis but it's on governments, not mums to save the world

8 October 2019, by Natalie Shenker and Amy Brown



Credit: shutterstock/SeventyFour

In the midst of debates about how to best tackle the climate crisis, [breastfeeding](#) was recently highlighted as a significant way women can help to make a difference. But while there is no doubt of the important role breastfeeding can play, there must be caution in the way such messages are communicated.

This is because telling [women](#) that [breastfeeding](#) will help save the planet just further fuels feelings of [anger, grief and loss](#) women can experience when they are unable to breastfeed. The UK, for example, has some of the [lowest breastfeeding rates in the world](#), but that is not through lack of desire. Most women who want to breastfeed—but are unable to do so—have been [affected by factors outside their control](#) and are deeply frustrated at any message that implies they should just try harder.

Given these barriers, simply telling women that breastfeeding is important is [unlikely to make any difference](#). Yet, there is a stark similarity in the way the climate and infant feeding crises are ineffectively communicated in the press—with emotive headlines about the need for individuals to

take action.

Of course, as individuals we can all play our part, but real change is only possible with investment at a societal level. This is why government investment in breastfeeding is needed to make changes in policy, industry and the workplace to enable both a healthier planet and a healthier population.

## Environmental cost

The science surrounding [breastfeeding and climate change](#) is only just being revealed. [Breastfeeding uses](#) few water or land resources, produces no carbon emissions and minimal or zero waste. It [suppresses ovulation](#), helping to reduce family sizes and keep [families healthy](#), which can further protect the impact of humanity on the Earth's resources.

Indeed, [a recent study](#) showed breastfeeding for six months saved 95-153kg CO<sub>2</sub>e (carbon dioxide equivalents) per baby compared to [formula](#) feeding. If all babies were breastfed for just six months in the UK, the [carbon emission savings](#) would equate to removing between 50,000 and 77,500 cars from the road for a year. This [data holds true](#), even when you take into consideration the small additional dietary demands of breastfeeding for the woman.

[The water footprint of milk powder](#) alone has been estimated at about 4,700 litres of water per kilo of milk powder. Formula is supplemented with multiple ingredients such as palm oil to approximate the minerals and vitamins required by babies for growth and development. Despite industry proclamations for greening of their supply chains, Nestlé's recent [temporary suspension](#) from the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil highlights potential deficiencies in sustainability in [global food production](#).

There are only [40-50 formula milk processing plants worldwide](#). The food miles consumed in transporting raw ingredients to these plants, and transporting them to consumers worldwide is as yet unknown but obviously considerable.

Formula preparation also consumes resources. Powdered infant formula is not sterile, and can [only be made safely](#) with water heated to 70°C. In the UK, the estimated energy cost of boiling this water over the first year of a baby's life equates to [over 1.5m kilograms of carbon dioxide](#). And in terms of waste, research shows 550m [infant formula](#) cans, 86,000 tons of metal and 364,000 tons of paper [are added to landfills every year](#) – and the formula industry has more than doubled since that research was published in 2009.

Not breastfeeding also usually [means a quicker return of women's periods](#). Considering that in the UK, on average, [each woman uses 264 pads](#) and tampons each year, breastfeeding also reduces the number of cotton fibres, [polyethylene plastics](#) and [contaminants being used](#) for their production.

### More support

There are of course obvious gaps in our knowledge across the whole sector that scientists must urgently address. But it's clear that [reducing our reliance on formula where possible](#) is an important step in helping mitigate the climate crisis. But what use is that message [in a system that fails to support breastfeeding mothers](#)? Women need the [right environment and support](#) for breastfeeding to flourish. But despite continued messaging that this is how you raise breastfeeding rates, the government fails to sufficiently invest.

Ultimately, highlighting the role breastfeeding can play in protecting our planet is not a message that should be aimed at individual women. It should be aimed at those with the power to make a change. And for breastfeeding rates to increase, governments must invest in [greater health professional support](#), cut down on the [reach of the breast-milk substitute industry](#), ensure [public spaces](#) and [workplaces](#) have policies in place to enable women to breastfeed, and increase the maternity protections women need to meet the

needs of their baby.

It also means ensuring that when formula milk is needed, it leaves the [lowest possible environmental footprint](#). Strategies such as reducing reliance on ready-made formula and disposable bottles, stepping up to prevent so many resources being used on formula milk promotion—especially that of [unnecessary follow on and toddler milks](#) – and requiring the industry to be responsible for reducing its own impact such as making products recyclable would be critical steps that protect us all, no matter how people choose to feed their babies.

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