

The Difference Between the Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiative and the Ten Steps to Successful Breastfeeding

What is the Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiative (BFHI)?

The Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiative (BFHI) is a structured, comprehensive, quality improvement strategy that was launched jointly by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in 1991 (WHO, 2024). It is geared towards improving maternity care practices through global implementation of the evidence-based policies outlined in "The Ten Steps to Successful Breastfeeding" (WHO, 2024). The Initiative aims for all maternity facilities worldwide to offer best practices of care that support families' informed infant feeding goals and protect them from unethical marketing practices from the baby food industry.

In 2018, the WHO and UNICEF released the results of their rigorous review of the BFHI. The revised document titled *IMPLEMENTATION GUIDANCE: Protecting, promoting and supporting breastfeeding in facilities providing maternity and newborn services - the revised Baby-friendly Hospital Initiative* (BFHI Implementation Guidance) included updates to the Ten Steps, detailed global requirements (named the global standards), sentinel and key indicators for monitoring, and rationale for each step along with practical guidance for implementation (WHO and UNICEF, 2018).

The Baby-Friendly designation process is transformative. It requires facilities to reevaluate and change long-standing policies and practices. Competency verification, monitoring, and quality improvement teams are established to implement and sustain the new practices. The BFHI offers facilities and healthcare professionals many helpful tools to tackle this challenge.

A facility's correct and complete implementation of the global standards is verified through an objective external assessment by trained assessors. This comprehensive evaluation entails a review of several key documents and data, such as the facility's infant feeding policy and patient education materials; interviews with administration, physicians, midwives, nurses and mothers; and direct observation of mother-infant care. Success is publicly acknowledged through accrediting the facility by a Baby-Friendly National Authority and awarding the Baby-Friendly designation. The award offers public recognition and is an incentive for facilities, health authorities and countries globally to continue improving the care offered to families. Continuous monitoring and reassessments ensure the sustainability and continuity of the strategy.

What are the Ten Steps to Successful Breastfeeding (Ten Steps)?

The Ten Steps are a global set of evidence-based policies and practices that, when implemented in maternity settings, have been shown to increase rates of breastfeeding initiation, duration, and exclusivity. (Perez-Excarnilla R, 2016) Studies have shown that the more steps a mother experiences, the more likely she is to reach her breastfeeding goals. (DiGirolamo AM, 2008)

STEP 1a	Comply fully with the <i>International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes</i> and relevant World Health Assembly resolutions.
STEP 1b	Have a written infant feeding policy that is routinely communicated to staff and parents.
STEP 1c	Establish ongoing monitoring and data-management systems.
STEP 2	Ensure that staff have sufficient knowledge, competence and skills to support breastfeeding.
STEP 3	Discuss the importance and management of breastfeeding with pregnant women and their families.
STEP 4	Facilitate immediate and uninterrupted skin-to-skin contact and support mothers to initiate breastfeeding as soon as possible after birth.
STEP 5	Support mothers to initiate and maintain breastfeeding and manage common difficulties.
STEP 6	Do not provide breastfed newborns any food or fluids other than breast milk, unless medically indicated.
STEP 7	Enable mothers and their infants to remain together and to practice rooming-in 24 hours a day.
STEP 8	Support mothers to recognize and respond to their infants' cues for feeding.
STEP 9	Counsel mothers on the use and risks of feeding bottles, teats and pacifiers.
STEP 10	Coordinate discharge so that parents and their infants have timely access to ongoing support and care.

The Ten Steps alone simply summarize the broad policies and practices to be implemented in a maternity care facility. It is the BFHI global standards described in the Implementation Guidance (WHO and UNICEF, 2018) that *provide* clarity, definition and measurability to the Ten Steps. For example, Step 4 states "Facilitate immediate and uninterrupted skin-to-skin contact and support mothers to initiate breastfeeding as soon as possible." The global standards defined by the BFHI clarify and define this step by adding the following two measurable standards:

- At least 80% of mothers of term infants report that their babies were placed in skin-to-skin contact with them immediately or within 5 minutes after birth and that this contact lasted 1 hour or more unless there were documented medically justifiable reasons for delayed contact.
- At least 80% of mothers of term infants report that their babies were put to the breast within 1 hour after birth unless there were documented medically justifiable reasons. (WHO and UNICEF, 2018)

How to ensure adequate implementation of the Ten Steps in healthcare facilities?

The Baby-Friendly award is publicly and globally recognized by mothers, health professionals, health authorities and countries alike as a standard of excellence for breastfeeding care and support, because the award ensures adequate implementation of the Ten Steps. However, ensuring this implementation requires external assessments and measuring-monitoring sentinel and other indicators. Simply implementing the Ten Steps along with self-monitoring of practices, outside of the Baby-Friendly designation process is not sufficient.

Self-monitoring is extremely important, and all hospitals are strongly encouraged to do it. It allows facilities to identify their own weaknesses and improve their practices. However, facilities that rely on self-monitoring alone may miss some key opportunities for improvement. A Brazilian study compared the results obtained by maternity facilities regarding adherence to the Ten Steps, after self-monitoring and after external assessments. The study found that when self-monitoring was used, facilities reported higher levels of compliance. (Araújo RG, 2019). This data suggests that by self-monitoring, facilities may not always identify problems or deviations from the standards and may miss opportunities to improve their practices.

There is also some evidence that suggests external assessment may produce better health outcomes. An evaluation of breastfeeding outcomes among *Texas BFHI* designated hospitals (by Baby-Friendly USA), *Texas Ten Steps* designated hospitals (a voluntary program based only on self-assessment) and Texas hospitals not participating in either program showed that the Texas BFHI designated hospitals had the highest rates of exclusive breastfeeding. (Texas Department of Health and Human Services, 2024- click [here](#) for further information).

These results show that only through external assessments can compliance with the BFHI Standards be ensured.

Why is public recognition such as Baby-Friendly designation needed and why is there need for a National BFHI Authority?

Changing established routines and adopting the Ten Steps as standards of care is not an easy process. It requires assembling teams, investing in and supporting healthcare workers, establishing monitoring systems and finally going through an external assessment process. Incentives are needed to motivate and or accelerate these changes. The Baby-Friendly designation, when awarded only after an external assessment, not only provides public recognition of compliance with the Ten Steps, but it also serves as an incentive to governments, healthcare facilities and healthcare workers that helps spread good quality of care and the global adoption of the Ten Steps as Standards of Care in maternity facilities.

A BFHI National Authority is needed to direct and oversee the whole process throughout the country. It is also important for consistent application of the standards and review of hospital policies and practices. This national authority may be placed under the umbrella of the national health authorities (ministry, department of public health) or in a non-governmental organization to which the government delegates this action. In any case, it is necessary that the government health authorities ensure the implementation of the nine key responsibilities as outlined by WHO (WHO and UNICEF, 2018) to ensure the sustainability of this initiative, which has important maternal and child health benefits and to which all families are entitled.

Conclusions

The Ten Steps summarize standards of care that are based on sound scientific evidence to ensure adequate and effective support for breastfeeding in healthcare facilities throughout the world. The BFHI offers a structured program to ensure the implementation of these standards and to maintain this quality of care throughout time. The whole process needs initial evaluation, planning for change, implementing changes, self-monitoring, external assessments and reassessments. But it also needs investments and incentives. The Baby-Friendly Award offers recognition and incentives. Families may

rest assured that facilities implement the Ten Steps and are protected from unethical marketing practices.

References

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