An update on Breastfeeding and newborn care in the context of COVID-19

THE LATEST ON THE GLOBAL SITUATION & INFORMATION ON BREASTFEEDING WITH COVID-19
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Current global situation

C A S E S  R E P O R T E D  T O  W H O  A S  O F  5  A U G U S T  2 0 2 1

- Cases: > 200 million
- Deaths: > 4.2 million
- Cases in under 5 year olds: > 1.2 million

* Data are incomplete for the current week. Cases depicted by bars; deaths depicted by line
Breastfeeding and prevention of illness

• **Breastfeeding and skin-to-skin contact** protects against child illness and death, especially against infectious diseases

• Children who are not breastfed are at higher risk from infectious diseases as well as lifelong ill-health from some non-communicable diseases

• For mothers, **breastfeeding protects against breast cancer** and improves birth spacing, and may protect against ovarian cancer and type 2 diabetes
Breastfeeding and COVID-19 vaccination

• Breastfeeding offers substantial health benefits to lactating women and their breastfed children
• Vaccine efficacy is expected to be similar in lactating women as in other adults
• Currently there is little data on the safety of COVID-19 in lactating women or their breastfed infants
• However, current WHO Emergency Use Listed COVID-19 vaccines are unlikely to pose a risk to the breastfeeding child
• On the basis of these considerations, WHO recommends vaccination in lactating women as in other adults
• WHO recommends continuing breastfeeding after vaccination

https://www.who.int/groups/strategic-advisory-group-of-experts-on-immunization/covid-19-materials
Newborn and infant risk of COVID-19

- Newborns and infants are at low risk of COVID-19 severe illness and death
- Of the few young children with COVID-19, most have had mild illness or a positive test without symptoms
- The virus SARS-CoV-2 has not been detected in breastmilk of mothers with confirmed or suspected COVID-19 and there is no evidence of virus transmission through breastmilk

The benefits of breastfeeding substantially outweigh the risks of illness associated with COVID-19
Mother and infant contact

- Mother and infant should be kept together at birth regardless of COVID-19 status
- A mother should not be separated from her infant unless too sick to care for her baby
- If a mother is unable to care for her infant, another competent family caregiver should be identified
- Mothers and infants should be enabled to:
  - **practice early and uninterrupted skin-to-skin contact**, as soon as possible after birth, including for preterm or low birthweight infants
  - remain together while rooming-in through out the day and night, especially immediately after birth and during establishment of breastfeeding and practice **kangaroo mother care** if the infant is preterm or low birthweight

* Kangaroo mother care is a method of care of preterm infants or low birthweight babies. Infants are carried with skin-to-skin contact by the mother or another family member. The baby uses minimal energy to maintain body temperature.

[https://www.who.int/maternal_child_adolescent/documents/9241590351/en/]
If breastfeeding is interrupted

- When severe illness prevents a mother from breastfeeding or caring for her infant, she should be **supported to express breastmilk** and provide it safely, while applying appropriate measures to prevent infections.

- **Support mothers to breastfeed as soon as they are able** if they cannot initiate breastfeeding during the first hour after delivery.

- **Provide assistance after recovery for relactation** to re-establish a milk supply and continue breastfeeding.
Alternatives to breastfeeding

If the mother is too unwell to breastfeed or express breastmilk, explore alternatives to breastfeeding a newborn or young infant, in priority order, as follows:

1. **Offer donor human milk** - if available from a human milk bank
   - Prioritize limited supplies for preterm and low birth weight newborns

2. **Offer wet nursing** (a woman breastfeeds another woman’s child) - where available, acceptable and supported
   - Prioritize wet nurses for the youngest infants. COVID-19 testing of a potential wet nurse is not required
   - Where HIV is prevalent, provide HIV counselling and rapid testing to prospective wet nurses
   - In the absence of testing, undertake HIV risk assessment, if feasible
   - If HIV risk assessment or counselling is not possible, facilitate and support wet nursing

3. **Breastmilk substitutes may be used as a last resort**
Best practice for infant care if mother is COVID-19 positive

- **Perform hand hygiene with soap and water or alcohol-based hand rub**, especially before contact with her child
- **Perform respiratory hygiene**: sneeze or cough into a tissue and immediately dispose of the tissue. Wash hands with soap and water or alcohol-based hand rub
- **Clean and disinfect surfaces** with which the mother has been in contact
- **Wear a medical mask until symptoms resolve** and criteria for release from isolation have been met

Women with COVID-19 can **breastfeed** if they wish to do so. They should:

- Practice respiratory hygiene and wear a mask
- Wash hands before and after touching the baby
- Routinely clean and disinfect surfaces

#COVID19 #CORONAVIRUS
Best practices for a breastfeeding mother who is COVID-19 positive

• A breastfeeding mother should be helped to clean her chest with soap and water if she has been coughing.

• A breastfeeding mother does not need to wash her breasts before every feed.

• If the mother does not have a medical mask, she should still be encouraged to continue breastfeeding as the benefits of breastfeeding outweigh the potential harms of the virus when breastfeeding.

• There should be no promotion of breastmilk substitutes, feeding bottles and teats, pacifiers or dummies in any part of facilities providing maternity or newborn services, or by any of the staff.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=6&v=OFGiy6t7kSE&feature=emb_logo
Care of small and sick newborn in the context of COVID-19

- **Ensure parents are screened for COVID-19** before entering the infant care unit
- Limit caregivers providing support for kangaroo mother care to **1 or 2 persons with protective equipment** and trained in infection prevention and control
- Develop strategies to support continuing kangaroo mother care at home
- Consider early discharge with follow-up where possible for pre-term and low birthweight infants

**RESOURCES:**

- Clinical management of COVID-19, Chapter 19
  Feeding and caring for infants and young children of mothers with COVID-19. [Download](#)

- Maintaining essential health services: operational guidance for the COVID-19 context
  Guidance for management of pregnant or lactating women or newborns with suspected or confirmed COVID-19. [Download](#)
In summary

• Regardless of COVID-19, mothers and infants should remain together, breastfeed, practice skin-to-skin contact and rooming-in day and night while applying necessary infection prevention and control measures

• From the available evidence, mothers should be counselled that the benefits of breastfeeding substantially outweigh any possible risks of transmission
WHO guidance and resources

**WHO Science Brief: Breastfeeding and COVID-19**
A WHO scientific brief and breastfeeding and COVID-19

**FAQs: Breastfeeding and COVID-19 for health care workers**
Frequently asked questions about breastfeeding & COVID-19 for health care workers (Arabic, English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Russian, Chinese to follow)

**World Health Organization. Kangaroo mother care: a practical guide**
A practical guide explaining a method of care of preterm infants involving infants being carried usually by the mother and skin-to-skin contact

**Video: Women with COVID-19 can breastfeed**
Available in Arabic, English, French, Spanish, Russian and Chinese

**Six infographics**
Infographics featuring topics surrounding pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding and COVID-19

**Q&A: Breastfeeding and COVID-19**
Common questions about breastfeeding and COVID-19
COVID-19 protective measures

Protect yourself & others

- Keep your distance
- Clean your hands frequently
- Cough & sneeze into your elbow
- Ventilate or open windows
- Wear a mask