

UNICEF UK BABY FRIENDLY INITIATIVE

STATEMENT ON INFANT FEEDING DURING THE CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19) OUTBREAK



Updated 20 April 2021

This statement is intended to support best practice for infant feeding during the coronavirus (Covid-19) crisis. To help health professionals continue to provide care for babies, their mothers and families, the UK Committee for UNICEF (UNICEF UK) Baby Friendly Initiative has produced a series of statements, guidance sheets, education refresher documents, resources and frequently asked questions. We suggest that practitioners check our [website](#) to ensure that they have the latest versions of our materials and that they also follow the latest updates from the [World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#). As the current crisis continues, strategies will be needed to ensure that services which have been stopped or amended are not lost, but instead are reinstated and/or reimagined based on the best possible evidence.

Breastfeeding

There is a wealth of evidence that breastfeeding reduces the risk of babies developing infectious diseases. There are numerous live constituents in human milk, including immunoglobulins, antiviral factors, cytokines and leucocytes that help to destroy harmful pathogens and boost the baby's immune system. [There is evidence](#) to suggest that mothers infected with Covid-19 and mothers who have received a Covid-19 vaccine pass their antibodies to the virus into their breastmilk, suggesting protective effects for their baby. Therefore, it is vital that we do all we can to continue to promote, protect and support breastfeeding.

It is recognised that mothers and babies have sometimes been separated in an attempt to curb the spread of Covid-19. However, [evidence now suggests](#) that this is unnecessary and potentially harmful. Mothers and babies should be enabled to stay together as much as possible, to have skin-to-skin contact, to feed their baby responsively and to have access to ongoing support when this is needed.

When mothers are partially breastfeeding, they can be encouraged to [maximise the amount of breastmilk](#) they are able to give or, if they choose, to be supported to return to full breastfeeding. If mothers are considering stopping breastfeeding, it is worth having a sensitive conversation about the value of continuing during the Covid-19 outbreak. If mother's own milk is not available, or where it needs supplementation, donor human milk is the option of choice, especially for vulnerable infants.

Evidence suggests that women who are breastfeeding can be offered a Covid-19 vaccine as part of the mass vaccination programme.

Formula feeding

Parents should be encouraged to continue adhering to current guidance on washing and sterilising equipment. Parents should be supported to bottle feed responsively, including pacing feeds and limiting the number of people who feed their baby.

Practical information for all parents if they have Covid-19 and are caring for their baby

If parents or carers are infected, take precautions to limit the spread of Covid-19 to the baby by:

- washing hands thoroughly before and after contact with the baby
- routinely cleaning and disinfecting any surfaces touched
- cleaning any infant feeding equipment, including breast pumps, bottles and teats thoroughly before and after use
- practicing respiratory hygiene, including during feeding, for example by avoiding coughing or sneezing on the baby and by wearing a fluid-resistant face mask
- parents should take care to avoid falling asleep with their baby (see [Co-sleeping and SIDS, Safer sleep for babies](#))
- if a breastfeeding mother is feeling unwell, continuing to breastfeed rather than expressing may be easier and less stressful during this time – alternatively, she may prefer for someone who is well to feed expressed breastmilk to the baby
- if the mother is too unwell to breastfeed or express breastmilk, she may be [supported to re-lactate](#) once well enough; consider using donor milk if available and applicable
- if a baby is being bottle fed with infant formula or expressed milk, wash equipment in hot, soapy water and sterilise carefully before each use.

Supporting close and loving relationships

Regardless of feeding method, it is essential that babies' needs for emotional attachment with their parents / primary caregiver continue to be considered. Keeping babies close and responding to their needs for food, love and comfort are all essential for babies' health, wellbeing and development. In addition, this will enhance the mother's mental wellbeing in the postnatal period. Visual face-to-face interaction with parents is important for newborn brain development and attachment. Parents who are asymptomatic should not be required to wear masks when interacting with their baby. If women have suspected or confirmed Covid-19, they should wear a mask when handling the baby but should be enabled to remove it and interact visually with the baby at a safe distance.

Accessing infant formula for families in need

During the Covid-19 outbreak, there has been concern that the financial situation of some families is deteriorating rapidly, leaving them unable to afford infant formula or food for their baby.

Currently, parents should be advised that stage 1 / first infant formula should be used for infants in the first year of life.

- Advise parents to always make up infant formula as per the manufacturer's guidance and to not be tempted to add more water to the feed to make it last longer, as diluting the milk could endanger the baby's health.

There are reports that the number of families applying for universal credit has dramatically increased during the Covid-19 outbreak. Families in receipt of universal credit are entitled to [Healthy Start](#) vouchers (or equivalent in the devolved nations). Supporting families to claim their vouchers will enable them to access infant formula.

It is acceptable for public services to distribute infant formula in an emergency and where there is genuine need, providing that a continued supply can be guaranteed. Normal infant

feeding support and safeguarding policies will apply. It is against the law for companies that manufacture or distribute infant formula to donate infant formula or infant milks marketed as infant foods for special medical purposes, or to offer lower cost supplies. Any infant formula or infant food for special medical purposes procured in an emergency must be paid for by those that purchase it. In local authorities, there should be a clear pathway for the protection of breastfeeding and infant formula distribution as part of the local authority emergency food provision system. For further information, see [Infant feeding during the coronavirus crisis: a guide for local authorities](#).

Additional information

A range of Baby Friendly resources on infant feeding and supporting close and loving relationships can be found on the [UNICEF UK Baby Friendly Initiative](#) website.

- [Statements](#) on infant feeding on neonatal units and supporting Baby Friendly assessments during the Covid-19 outbreak
- [Guidance sheets](#) to support health services to provide remote care and help mothers and babies overcome challenges
- [Education refresher sheets](#) for staff working to deliver postnatal care
- [Frequently asked questions](#)
- [Useful links and references](#)

Telephone support for parents: [National Breastfeeding Helpline](#) **0300 100 0212** from 9:30am to 9:30pm, 7 days a week. Live online support via [web chat](#).

Information on infant formula can be found at: [First Steps Nutrition Trust](#).