

Breastfeeding: A Vital Emergency Response. Are You Ready?

Breastfeeding Saves Lives in Emergencies

“While an emergency may be an unplanned event, what we CAN predict is that one will happen. What is unknown is when, where, what type, and how big the emergency will be.”

Audrey Naylor, MD, DrPH Wellstart International

Emergencies often occur when least expected, and sometimes when we are least prepared. They can include a wide range of unsettling events, including personal or family crises, public health emergencies (such as a flu pandemic), acts of terror and violence, and natural disasters or weather-related events (such as floods and blizzards).

Research shows that infants and children are the most vulnerable during emergencies!

- Nearly 95% of infant and child deaths in emergencies result from diarrhea due to contaminated water and an unsanitary environment.
- Infant formula has been linked to an increase in infant disease and death: it can also be contaminated and requires clean water and fuel to sterilize formula, bottles, and nipples. Lack of electricity also can make it difficult to preserve formula.
- Breastfeeding saves lives! Human milk is always clean, requires no fuel, water, or electricity, and is available, even in the direst circumstances.
- Human milk contains antibodies that fight infection, including diarrhea and respiratory infections common among infants in emergency situations.
- Human milk provides infants with perfect nutrition, including the proper amount of vitamins and minerals required for normal growth.
- Breastfeeding releases hormones that lower stress and anxiety in both babies and mothers.
- Mothers who breastfeed are able to keep their babies warm to prevent hypothermia.

Mothers Can Breastfeed in an Emergency

- **The safest food in an emergency is the mother’s own milk. Donor human milk is the next best option. Mothers who cannot directly feed their babies can also be supported to express their milk.**
- Women who are stressed can continue to make milk. A quiet area that helps mothers relax can help their milk flow to the baby.
- Malnourished mothers can make plenty of milk.
- Even mothers who have already discontinued breastfeeding may be able to restart breastfeeding (known as “relactation”).
- If a baby (or mother) becomes ill, the *best* thing the mother can do is to continue breastfeeding to provide her baby with human antibodies that fight the illness.
- Support makes the difference!

Protecting and Supporting Breastfeeding in an Emergency: Strategies for Relief Organizations, Health Care Providers, and Communities

Before an Emergency:

- Provide breastfeeding training for all volunteers who will be assisting in emergency relief efforts.
- Incorporate policies that protect and support breastfeeding in emergencies as part of community emergency preparedness plans.
- Implement the guidelines of the *Operational Guidance on Infant and Young Child Feeding in Emergencies*, developed by the Infant Feeding in Emergencies Core Group (available at www.ennonline.net).
- Identify community resources to assist with breastfeeding, including lactation consultants, medical professionals, lay support groups, and state and local breastfeeding coalitions.

During an Emergency:

- **Feed mothers** so they can properly meet their babies' needs.
- Keep families together.
- Encourage mothers to continue breastfeeding! If a mother is pregnant, encourage her to breastfeed when her baby is born!
- Provide a safe place for mothers to breastfeed or express milk for their babies.
- Help mothers who have questions about breastfeeding to access support (see "Who Can Help" below).
- Do not solicit or accept donations of infant formula. Formula should be used only when the mother has already weaned and relactation is not possible or desired. If formula is used, use only ready-to-feed formula served in a cup (cups are easier to clean than bottles).

Who Can Help

- State Breastfeeding Coalitions: www.usbreastfeeding.org/Coalitions/CoalitionsDirectory/tabid/74/Default.aspx
 - Knowledgeable breastfeeding support personnel:
 - International Lactation Consultant Association members: www.ilca.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=3337
 - Local Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program staff: www.fns.usda.gov/wic/Contacts/coor.htm
 - La Leche League leaders: www.llli.org/resources/assistance.html?m=0,0
 - Physicians and other health care professionals can offer needed assistance to induce or continue lactation: <http://www.usbreastfeeding.org/AboutUs/Membership/tabid/64/Default.aspx>
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About World Breastfeeding Week

World Breastfeeding Week, celebrated August 1-7 each year in the United States, is an annual global initiative that raises awareness of the vital importance of breastfeeding. The theme is established each year by the World Alliance for Breastfeeding Advocacy. The 2009 theme, "Breastfeeding: A Vital Emergency Response. Are You Ready?" calls upon organizations and individuals in communities everywhere to include breastfeeding support as part of emergency preparedness planning. To learn more about World Breastfeeding Week and to access additional resources, visit the USBC Web site or the World Breastfeeding Week Web site at www.worldbreastfeedingweek.org.

About the United States Breastfeeding Committee

The United States Breastfeeding Committee (USBC) is an independent nonprofit coalition of 41 nationally influential professional, educational, and governmental organizations. Representing over half a million concerned professionals and the families they serve, the USBC and its member organizations share a common mission to improve the Nation's health by working collaboratively to protect, promote, and support breastfeeding. For more information on the USBC, visit www.usbreastfeeding.org.

Adapted from the International Lactation Consultant Association's World Breastfeeding Week materials.