

Breastfeeding and Emergency Situations

Information for Healthcare Professionals and Emergency Relief Personnel

Natural and human-origin disasters place infants at risk. Breastfeeding provides food security, protection from infection, and safe food and hydration.

Protecting and supporting breastfeeding should be part of all official emergency preparedness plans. *Breastfeeding specialists and counselors* are important to be included among emergency personnel.

Guiding principles, particularly for emergency shelters:

- Keep mothers and infants together.
- Rapidly identify the feeding needs of each family with infants and toddlers.
- Support and encourage mothers to initiate and continue breastfeeding.
- Offer quiet protected spaces for breastfeeding and private spaces for milk expression.
- Reduce queuing for breastfeeding mothers to prioritize their hydration and nutrition.
- Infants may be fussy and want to feed more frequently. Reassure mothers that this is normal.
- Reassure mothers that stress does not generally reduce milk production.
- Missed feedings or dehydration may temporarily reduce milk production. This can be reversed with rehydration and frequent feeding.
- Mothers who are separated from their infants should express their milk early and often and/or breastfeed other infants to maintain milk production.

For infants under 6 months:

- Infants under 6 months should be exclusively breastfed and get no commercial milk formula (CMF), animal milk, or solids.
- Mothers who were mixed feeding should be encouraged to transition to exclusive breastfeeding.
- Mothers who have recently stopped breastfeeding should be encouraged to resume breastfeeding (relactation). Skilled lactation help is important.
- Relactation, breastfeeding from another mother (wet nursing), or donor milk -in that order- are preferred to commercial milk formula (CMF) for non-breastfed infants. If none of these are not available, CMF will be necessary.

Infants older than 6 months:

- Non-breastfed infants older than 6 months can be fed animal milk or CMF and appropriate solids.

Infants of any age should be fed by cup instead of bottle or teat. Cups can be cleaned more easily or can be disposable.

Distributing commercial milk formula (CMF):

- CMF supply must be strictly controlled by emergency personnel because unrestricted access endangers infant health. CMF should only be given to infants who cannot be breastfed after assessment of need by a trained health professional.
- Ensure that families receiving CMF have all the resources needed for its use. Store and distribute CMF discreetly.
- Bathrooms/toilets should not be used for preparing CMF, cleaning feeding supplies, or feeding infants.
- Donations of CMF must not be accepted by emergency organizations and should be actively discouraged.
- CMF advertising and sponsorship should not be allowed in emergency settings.

Donations: Advise the public not to send CMF to the emergency.

Breast milk can be donated via local milk banks, but local informal milk sharing may be necessary.

