

# Aligning best practices and addressing misinformation for optimal infant feeding during the COVID-19 pandemic

## COVID-19 and its infodemic

During the COVID-19 pandemic, there is also an overabundance of information, an infodemic, circulating about the virus and infant feeding. This brief provides accurate information regarding breastfeeding and COVID-19 and addresses ways for protecting yourself from mis- or disinformation.

With the majority of the world having access to technology today, any individual or group can publish information on the internet. This information may or may not be accurate and reaches a larger number of people than ever before.

Additionally, experts are still learning about COVID-19, so guidance and recommendations are continually being updated. The amount of information being shared makes it difficult for people to find accurate, trustworthy information, and misinformation can be harmful to people's physical and mental health.<sup>1</sup>

**Misinformation:** false information that is spread, regardless of whether there is intent to mislead.

**Disinformation:** deliberately misleading or biased information; manipulated narrative or facts; propaganda.



### Protecting yourself from misinformation

Misinformation can come from several different sources such as:

- Social media.
- Friends and family members.
- Non-government websites.

Some ways to protect yourself against misinformation and remain informed are:

1. Check reputable news sources or the most current, reliable information COVID-19 frequently.
  - Refer to local and national health department or ministry of health websites and health care workers for information on the COVID-19 situation in your area and World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) for global data and guidance.
  - As we learn more about COVID-19, it is important to ensure you are following the most up-to-date guidance.
2. Find the sources of information shared by non-reputable sources (i.e., social media, friends, TV).
  - If you see or hear information shared through one of these channels, check the source to see where that information is coming from. Look at the original post and look up information about the organization or person.



### Ensuring you share correct information<sup>2</sup>

- Identify sources with a consistent, accurate information and refer people to those sources.
- Correct misinformation when shared by providing facts and current evidence.
- Establish trust between yourself and the community.

#### COVID-19 and Infant Feeding Working Group (CIF WG)

Members include representatives from the American Academy of Pediatrics, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, University of Texas-Austin, Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, Human Milk Banking Association of North America, Johns Hopkins University, Mothers' Milk Bank at Austin, National Institutes of Health, PACT, PATH, UNICEF, USAID, USAID Advancing Nutrition, University of Idaho, University of Washington, and the World Health Organization.

The contents do not necessarily reflect the views of the CIF WG members or their organizations.

#### Contact

Kiersten Israel-Ballard  
kisrael-ballard@path.org

# Breastfeeding and COVID-19

At the beginning of the pandemic, there was uncertainty about the safety of breastfeeding in the context of COVID-19. WHO recommended that mothers initiate and continue breastfeeding even when COVID-19 may be suspected.<sup>3</sup> Scientific studies since that time continue to support this recommendation.

As a result of the diversity of guidance and the proliferation of misinformation, confusion and uncertainty in relation to COVID-19 and breastfeeding still exist. Common questions about breastfeeding and COVID-19 are answered on the right.



Continue breastfeeding with safety precautions if showing symptoms of or infected with COVID-19.

“Take precautions when breastfeeding, day and night” image accessed from the USAID Advancing Nutrition - UNICEF IYCF Image Bank (iycf.advancingnutrition.org).

## What are best practices at hospitals to encourage breastfeeding and ensure lactation success for a mother infected with COVID-19 and her newborn?

- Establish a policy to keep mothers and infants together.
- Educate parents on how to protect their infants from COVID-19, such as wearing a mask if showing symptoms and washing hands.<sup>4,5</sup>
- Communicate accurate information about the relative risks of breastfeeding and not breastfeeding in the context of COVID-19 in all economic settings.
- Continue practices to promote early and exclusive breastfeeding, such as early and frequent skin-to-skin contact and rooming in.<sup>4,5</sup>
- When feasible, provide mothers infected with COVID-19 with a medical mask.

## Can COVID-19 be passed to the infant if a mom is infected with COVID-19 at delivery?

**There is no evidence of vertical transmission to date.**

COVID-19 has not been found in amniotic fluid, cord blood, vaginal discharge, neonatal throat swabs, or breast milk. Transmission to the infant could occur via respiratory droplets post-delivery; precautions such as wearing a mask are recommended.

## Can a newborn room-in with the mother if she is infected with COVID-19?

**Yes! Mothers and infants should remain together after birth.**

Evidence shows there is little risk of mother-to-child transmission of COVID-19 when infants roomed-in with mothers and breastfed. If a mother is showing symptoms, she should wear a mask during any contact with infant and wash hands before and after touching her infant.<sup>6,7</sup>

## Can mothers breastfeed while infected with COVID-19?

**Yes! Mothers should continue to breastfeed if they become infected with COVID-19 at any time.**

To date, there is no evidence of infective COVID-19 in breast milk. If a mother is showing symptoms, she should wear a mask during any contact with infant and wash hands before and after touching her infant.<sup>6,7</sup> If a mother is feeling too ill to breastfeed, she can provide breast milk to the infant through alternative methods when feasible, such as milk expression by hand or pump or using donor human milk. The protection offered by breastfeeding far outweighs the small risk of transmission and COVID illness in young infants.

## Is it safe to use donor human milk during the pandemic?

**Yes! It is safe to feed an infant donor human milk when the mother's own milk is not available.<sup>8</sup>**

Human milk is the best source of nutrition and immune protection for a newborn infant.

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