

MEDIA RELEASE
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Expert: COVID-19 has prompted a return to breastfeeding.

A Western Sydney University expert in infant feeding during emergencies has highlighted the impact of COVID-19 on new mums, who are placing increasing importance on breastfeeding during the pandemic.

Adjunct Associate Professor Karleen Gribble from the University's School of Nursing and Midwifery said the global health crisis has led women to continue breastfeeding longer than they had previously intended, or even restart breastfeeding after they had weaned.

'During these difficult times, it's understandable for mums to be concerned about the wellbeing of their babies,' said Associate Professor Gribble.

'Mums are concerned about contracting the virus, and are considering breastfeeding as a means of boosting their overall health and immunity. They are also concerned about the availability of formula, and are considering the practical value of breastfeeding while they are in lockdown.'

Associate Professor Gribble is a community educator with the Australian Breastfeeding Association (ABA) – a national organisation which supports women to breastfeed their infants and young children.

Since the advent of the pandemic, the ABA has experienced an increase in the number of women who are seeking support and assistance with breastfeeding.

ABA Senior Manager Breastfeeding Information and Research, Naomi Hull, said in April 2020 the ABA's National Breastfeeding Helpline received 6103 calls – up to a 1000 call increase, compared with the usual monthly average. The average call length also increased from 12 to 16 minutes.

In response, the ABA conducted a survey to determine the types of support and advice that women may require during the pandemic. Between 16 March and 18 May 2020, ABA volunteers logged the concerns of 340 mothers and caregivers and recorded 292 separate concerns about:

- the ability to continue breastfeeding;
- the ability of breastmilk to protect against infections;
- ways to increase their milk supply, or reduce their use of formula supplements; and
- how to restart breastfeeding.

The most common concern, cited in 38 per cent of all responses, was in regards to insufficient milk or inadequate weight gain – with mothers indicating they were concerned about their inability see a midwife or child and family health nurse and have their babies weighed.

Ms Hull said it became apparent that, for many women, the ABA National Breastfeeding Helpline became their only avenue of obtaining advice, support and reassurance about their babies while they were in isolation.

'After having a baby, women ordinarily receive ongoing face-to-face support from health services, and are able to routinely check on their baby's progress. However, during the pandemic these support services were not consistently available,' said Ms Hull.

'Our counsellors noted that many women were anxious about the lack of access to usual support services, and whether they were able to continue providing nutrition for their infants. They also really wanted the protection for their baby that breastmilk can provide.'

Associate Professor Gribble assisted the ABA with analysing the survey data and providing recommendations. She said it was clear from the data that the lockdown has been really hard for new mothers.

‘You’re meant to have people around you to provide support when you have a baby – but women are being deprived of contact with health professionals, friends and family, and even their own mothers after they give birth,’ said Associate Professor Gribble.

‘We need to support these new mums in any way that we can.’

Associate Professor Gribble is an expert in infant feeding during emergencies. Her previous research has found that Australia lacks adequate planning for infants in emergencies – an issue which has been evident in both the summer bushfires and in the COVID-19 pandemic response.

‘Infants are very vulnerable in emergencies, and they need specific planning to ensure that their mothers and caregivers are well supported to protect them,’ she said,

‘The ABA is not mentioned in any of Australia’s emergency planning, but it is clear that their services have provided a safety net in the pandemic. It is also clear that national planning for infants in emergencies must be urgently developed, funded and implemented.’

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