

Media Release – March 3 2020

For immediate release

ABA releases information about breastfeeding and viral illnesses

Australian Breastfeeding Association has released important information for families who are at risk of experiencing viral illness, including respiratory viruses such as the coronavirus.

If a breastfeeding mother becomes unwell with a virus, continuation of direct breastfeeding is usually warranted. It is likely that the infant has already been exposed to the virus and will benefit from the ongoing protection from illness provided by breastfeeding.

If a mother has been diagnosed with or is suspected of having a virus, care should be taken to avoid spreading the virus to the baby while the mother continues to breastfeed. This can be done with careful handwashing, and covering of mouth when coughing or sneezing. Influenza and other similar viral illnesses are not spread to babies via breastmilk. Rather, people infected with the flu can spread it to others via tiny germ droplets; for example, when coughing or sneezing.

‘Breastmilk provides infants with a range of anti-infective factors that work together to help protect infants from illness,’ ABA Senior Manager Breastfeeding Information and Research Naomi Hull said.

‘The importance of breastfeeding for the health of mothers and their infants is well established. For example, research shows not breastfeeding increases an infant’s risk of a variety of infections including gastrointestinal, respiratory and ear.’

Research released by the World Health Organisation in 2013 showed the incidence of gastrointestinal infection and diarrhoea is higher in infants who are not breastfed. In a meta-analysis of studies from high, medium and low income countries, infants who were not breastfed were approximately 2.7 times more likely to develop a gastrointestinal infection. In the UK, a study from 2007 found that approximately half of hospital admissions due to gastrointestinal infection could be prevented each month if infants were exclusively breastfed.

Lower respiratory tract infections (LRTI) are more common in infants who are not breastfed. A 2007 report estimated a 72% reduction in hospital admissions for LRTI if all infants were exclusively breastfed for 4 months. A 2016 meta-analysis found that breastfeeding reduced hospital admissions for LRTI by 57%.

Risks involved with the disruption of direct breastfeeding include:

- A reduction in breastmilk supply. Some women find that expressing removes milk less effectively than their infant. If less milk is removed from a mother’s breasts, then she will make less milk.
- Emotional distress for the infant. Breastfeeding is more than just about food for infants. It also provides a sense of security and warmth.
- Possible breast refusal by the infant when trying to re-commence direct breastfeeding due to the infant developing a preference for the bottle.

- A reduction in anti-infective factors provided to the infant. The concentration of various anti-infective factors in expressed breastmilk may be less as compared to the concentration provided by the breastmilk when an infant feeds directly from the breast.

If interruption to direct breastfeeding is determined to be medically necessary, expressing is encouraged. The expressed breastmilk can be fed to the infant to reduce the risk of the infant becoming unwell.

For more information about avoiding spreading viruses see:

- [The flu and you. Help stop the spread. Australian Government. Department of Health.](#)
- [Protect Against Flu: Caregivers of Infants and Young Children. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.](#)
- [Emergencies preparedness, response. What can I do? World Health Organization.](#)

For more information about breastfeeding see:

- [Breastfeeding and influenza](#)
- [Infant feeding in emergencies](#)
- [Expressing and storing breastmilk](#)
- [Health outcomes associated with infant feeding](#)
- [Breastfeeding and hospitalisation](#)

Resources

The World Health Organisation (WHO), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and UNICEF provide the following useful information about coronavirus including in relation to breastfeeding through the virus.

WHO:

- [Home care for patients with suspected novel coronavirus \(nCoV\) infection presenting with mild symptoms and management of contacts](#)
- [Coronavirus disease \(COVID-19\) outbreak](#)
- [Q&A on coronaviruses \(COVID-19\)](#)

CDC:

- [Interim Guidance on Breastfeeding for a Mother Confirmed or Under Investigation For COVID-19](#)
- [About Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\)](#)
- [Frequently Asked Questions and Answers: Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\) and Pregnancy](#)

UNICEF:

- [Coronavirus disease \(COVID-19\): What parents should know](#)



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