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COVID-19 AND BREASTFEEDING

Interim Guidance

This interim guidance is based on what is currently known about COVID-19 and the transmission of other viral respiratory infections, as informed by the World Health Organization and Centres for Disease Control.
WFP will update this interim guidance as needed, as additional information becomes available.

Common signs of COVID-19 infection include respiratory symptoms, fever, cough, shortness of breath and breathing difficulties. In more severe cases, infection can cause pneumonia, severe acute respiratory syndrome, kidney failure and even death.

Much is unknown about how COVED-19 is spread. It is thought to be transferred person-to-person in respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs, exhales or sneezes; directly breathing in droplets from a person with COVID-19 who coughs out or exhales droplets is the main route of transmission. People may be able to catch COVID-19 by touching objects or surfaces the droplets have landed on, then touching their eyes, nose or mouth.

Interim Guidance for breastfeeding women confirmed to have COVID-19 or are under investigation

In limited studies reported to date, on women with COVID-19 and another coronavirus infection, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS-CoV), the virus has not been detected in breast milk. However, it is not known whether mothers with COVID-19 can transmit the virus via breast milk.

In limited reports of lactating women infected with the SARS-CoV, virus has not been detected in breast milk; however, antibodies against SARS-CoV were detected in at least one sample.

- Whether and how a mother should start or continue breastfeeding should be determined by the mother in coordination with her family and healthcare providers.
- Confirmed COVID-19 or symptomatic PUI mothers should take all possible precautions to avoid spreading the virus to her infant, including washing her hands before touching the infant and wearing a protective face mask, if possible, while feeding at the breast.
- If the mother is expressing breast milk with a manual or electric breast pump, she should wash her hands before touching any pump or bottle parts and ensure proper pump cleaning after each use. She should consider having a well person feed the expressed breast milk to the infant, if possible.
- Avoid close contact with anyone showing symptoms of respiratory illness such as coughing and sneezing (more than 1 metre (3 feet) away.

(See diagram below: Steps to Proper Handwashing)

Guidance on infant and young child feeding for women who do not have indications of COVID-19

Breastmilk is the best source of nutrition for most infants.
To achieve optimal growth, development and health, and save lives, WFP, WHO and UNICEF recommend:

- early initiation of breastfeeding (within an hour from birth);
- exclusive breastfeeding for the first 6 months of life (unless advised otherwise for medical reasons);

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- introduction of nutritionally adequate, safe and appropriate complementary foods starting at 6 months, together with continued breastfeeding until 24 months of age, or beyond, to meet their evolving nutritional requirements.

Recommended infant and young child feeding practices apply in both stable and humanitarian emergency contexts.

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Sources of information

Centres for Disease Control: https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prepare/pregnancy-breastfeeding.html

World Health Organization: https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus

Further information:

Understanding COVID-19 training course: https://openwho.org/courses/introduction-to-ncov

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