

World

What does COVID-19 mean for breastfeeding?

Source: [Save the Children](#)

Posted: 9 Apr 2020

Originally published: 9 Apr 2020

Origin: [View original](#)

All information in this blog was checked at the time of writing, for up-to-date advice on COVID-19 and breastfeeding please look to WHO and UNICEF

Two years ago, I was packing my hospital bag, getting ready to go into hospital for the birth of my baby girl. About a week before the birth I was screened for MRSA. This made me briefly worry about the risk of infection in the hospital, but it was easy to move on and focus on preparing for baby.

This week a close friend is also preparing her hospital bag, getting ready to go into hospital for the birth of her baby girl. But the world has turned on its head. The impact of COVID-19 means she's had few hospital appointments and she'll be rushed out of the hospital as quickly as possible. Even finding newborn nappies has required friends and family searching shops.

BREASTFEEDING TO PREPARE FOR AN EMERGENCY

For some families preparing to breastfeed during an emergency was sadly not unexpected. Even before COVID-19, many parents were living in crisis conditions. Like the families we have been supporting in Yemen who have been living under escalating conflict for five years now. For others this wasn't expected. Mums in the UK are now also planning to breastfeed during a national emergency. They all need our support more than ever.

WHAT DOES BREASTFEEDING SUPPORT LOOK LIKE?

When my baby girl was born, one of our first outings was to a local breastfeeding group. I was immediately directed to a comfy chair, handed a tea and a doughnut, and told to relax my shoulders. Following that wonderful welcome, the group became a huge support to me during maternity leave.

When my friend gets home with her baby, that's where she'll stay. There will be limited community midwife visits, if at all. Family and friends will not be able to visit.

Even for healthy mothers this is a scary and difficult time to be starting breastfeeding. So it's more important than ever that we make sure people can make informed decisions and that we don't put more barriers in the way through our efforts to respond to the crisis.

Misinformation and fake news spreads quickly when people are scared. We've seen some hospitals and countries ban birth-partners and some start routinely separating mothers and babies after birth. Neither backed by evidence that this would be in the best interests of mothers or babies.

WHAT DO WE REALLY KNOW ABOUT BREASTFEEDING AND COVID-19?

Breastfeeding saves lives and protects against many infections. The virus has never been found in breast milk and transmission via breastfeeding has never been demonstrated. Women with COVID-10 can breastfeed. They should: Practice respiratory hygiene during feeding, wearing a mask where available; Wash hands before and after touching the baby; Routinely clean and disinfect surfaces they have touched. Women who are too unwell to breastfeed their baby due to COVID-19 or other complications, should be supported to safely provide their baby with breastmilk. This could include: Expressing milk for another care giver to give to baby; Relactation – being supported to start breastfeeding again once they are well enough; Donor human milk. Right now, there isn't a great deal of evidence about COVID-19 and breastfeeding but researchers are constantly working on this. For example, weighing the risks and benefits of separating mothers and newborns.

HOW CAN I GET SUPPORT DURING COVID-19?

I'm really excited by the potential of technology to reach more people than ever before with quality breastfeeding support. I've even heard examples where technology is improving support, like here from the chair of the Association of Breastfeeding Mothers:

PLACES YOU CAN SEEK BREASTFEEDING SUPPORT ONLINE:

- For the latest information on breastfeeding and COVID-19 see [WHO's Q&A](#)
- Global Health Media have an excellent set of instructional videos – this one in particular is really helpful for learning about how to breastfeed: [Attaching Your Baby at the Breast](#)

- Many lactation consultants are now offering remote support. They have IBCLC after their name, which means they're members of the International Board of Certified Lactation Consultants and have had extensive training – visit [its website](#) to check if someone is registered.

SUPPORT FOR BREASTFEEDING IN THE UK:

- [The NHS](#) – Ask your midwife what support is offered in your area, for example, in some areas health visiting teams are offering breastfeeding support by phone.
- The [National Breastfeeding Helpline](#) is open 9:30am – 9:30pm on 0300 100 0212 every single day. They also have a [web chat](#).
- The [Breastfeeding Network's Drugs in Breastmilk Information service](#) offers evidence based info on the safety of medications and treatments during breastfeeding.

My baby is now 22 months old and delighted to have both her parents working from home. Particularly me as that means her milk bar is open 24/7! The support I received in those early days made all the difference to my breastfeeding journey, as well as the ongoing support when she started solids and when I returned to work.

If you're breastfeeding or preparing to breastfeed at the moment, how are you finding it? Are there questions the WHO or other sources aren't answering right now? Tell us what's on your mind in the comments below.

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Primary country:

[World](#)

Source:

[Save the Children](#)

Format:

[News and Press Release](#)

Theme:

[Health](#)

Vulnerable groups:

[Children / Women](#)

Disaster type:

Epidemic

Language:

English

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Posted: 11 Apr 2020

Originally published: 9 Apr 2020

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Posted: 11 Apr 2020

Originally published: 9 Apr 2020

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Source: Global Fund

Posted: 11 Apr 2020

Originally published: 10 Apr 2020

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