

Should women breastfeed if they have COVID-19?

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Reviewing the changing guidance and evidence for policy recommendations for the
Ministry of Health of Armenia

BACKGROUND

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, providers and expecting parents seek information regarding SARS-CoV-2 viral transmission from mother to baby and the safety of breastfeeding when COVID-19-positive. Our goal is to understand the changing guidance by the WHO, CDC, AAP, and others since the start of the pandemic and to create health education materials for mothers that reflect the current recommendations from these organizations.

METHODS

We performed a literature review to assess the evidence for the current guidelines regarding breastfeeding and postpartum practices for mothers who are COVID-19-positive. This review includes the evidence surrounding vertical transmission of COVID-19. We interviewed experts in the US and Armenia about current practices and common issues they are facing throughout the pandemic.

COVID-19-positive mothers can breastfeed safely with proper precautions. However, quickly changing guidelines have caused parents and providers to be uncertain about which recommendations to follow.

RESULTS

As new research is being published, national and international health guidelines are shifting regarding postpartum feeding practices. Initial recommendations encouraged infected mothers to separate from their baby until they were no longer contagious. This reflected a lack of evidence about both mode of transmission and COVID-19's potential risk to the neonate. However, skin-to-skin contact and breastfeeding within the first hour of birth are essential for newborn development and the development of maternal lactation. Recent evidence indicates that risk of vertical transmission is low and can be diminished with respiratory protection. Therefore, current guidance by the WHO, CDC, and AAP supports mothers who choose to breastfeed while infected with the support of their healthcare team (1, 2, 3). Although there is still some variation in the guidance, the organizations agree that breastfeeding while COVID-19-positive is not contraindicated with the use of hand hygiene and facial coverings during feedings (Table 1).

	Breastfeeding (BF) recommended?	Hand Hygiene	Face Covering	Expressed milk	Isolate outside of BF
WHO (as of 5/7/2020)	Yes (Skin-to-skin)	Yes	If available	If mother is too unwell	Not stated
CDC (as of 6/9/2020)	Not explicit (parent's decision)	Yes	Yes	May be safer	Yes
AAP (as of 7/31/2020)	Can be done safely	Yes	Yes	May be safer	Maintain social distancing
ACOG (as of 7/28/2020)	Not explicit (parents decision)	Yes	Yes	May be safer	Not stated
UNICEF (as of 5/28/2020)	Yes (Skin-to-skin)	Yes	If available	If mother is too unwell	Not stated

Table 1. Comparison of current guidelines for breastfeeding with COVID-19

HEALTH EDUCATION MATERIALS

The quickly changing guidance has caused many parents and providers to be hesitant about which recommendations to follow. We developed a series of health education materials - flyers, posters, and social media posts - that describe the current recommendations in language that is accessible to the lay population. These materials are being translated, printed, and distributed in Armenia.



Image 1. Tri-fold pamphlet to be distributed to mothers and expecting mothers in Armenia

REFERENCES

- American Academy of Pediatrics. Breastfeeding Guidance Post Hospital Discharge for Mothers or Infants with Suspected or Confirmed SARS-CoV-2 Infection. <https://services.aap.org/en/pages/2019-novel-coronavirus-covid-19-infections/clinical-guidance/breastfeeding-guidance-post-hospital-discharge/>. Published July 29, 2020. Accessed Aug 18, 2020.
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