

VAGELOS COLLEGE OF PHYSICIANS & SURGEONS

PROGRAM FOR EDUCATION IN GLOBAL AND POPULATION HEALTH

## Exploring the Impact of COVID-19 on Breastfeeding in Armenia

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Research Aim: Exploring the impact of COVID19 on postpartum care and breastfeeding rates in Yerevan, Armenia and also understanding the context in New York City.

#### **BACKGROUND**

Breastmilk provides optimal infant nutrition and benefits for mothers. However, there are many barriers to successful breastfeeding. Early in the pandemic, an absence of evidence on SARS-COV-2 transmission between mother-infant dyad informed ambiguous guidelines on postpartum care<sup>1</sup>. In some settings, this increased barriers to breastfeeding, such as discouraging skin-to-skin contact, rooming-in or separating mother and infant for long periods of time<sup>2</sup>. We explore the experiences of healthcare providers in Armenia and New York from March 2020 to today to inform the development of further research proposals in this area.

#### **METHODS**

- We conducted a literature review of the original guidance in March 2020, at the start of the COVID19 pandemic, and the evidence that supported the revision of these guidelines throughout 2020 and 2021 until today. We also reviewed the evidence on how these new policies impacted breastfeeding practices around the globe.
- We conducted informal open-ended discussions with stakeholders at New York
   Presbyterian/CUIMC in New York and in Yerevan, Armenia to explore the topic, as a first phase of developing a research proposal.
- We developed health education materials with the most recent guidance on breastfeeding during the COVID19 pandemic and vaccination for lactating individuals, using evidence from our literature review. These are being reviewed by stakeholders who requested them in Armenia.

# **CURRENT GUIDANCE ON BREASTFEEDING AND COVID19**

	Breastfeeding (BF) Recommended?	Hand Hygiene	Face Covering	Expressed Milk	Isolate outside of BF
CDC (as of 6/17/2021)	Yes (with extra precautions)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
AAP (as of 3/29/2021)	Yes (Skin to skin also recommended)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes, should maintain responsible distance"
ACOG (as of 8/4/2021)	Safe to breastfeed baby	Yes	Yes	Yes (healthy caregiver to give it, if possible)	
WHO (as of 5/7/2021)	Yes (Skin to skin also recommended)	Yes	Yes (if none available, continue to BF)	If mother is too unwell	
UNICEF (as of 7/29/2021)	Yes (Skin to skin also recommended)	Yes	Yes	If mother is too unwell	

Table 1: Breastfeeding Guidance per US and International Organizations

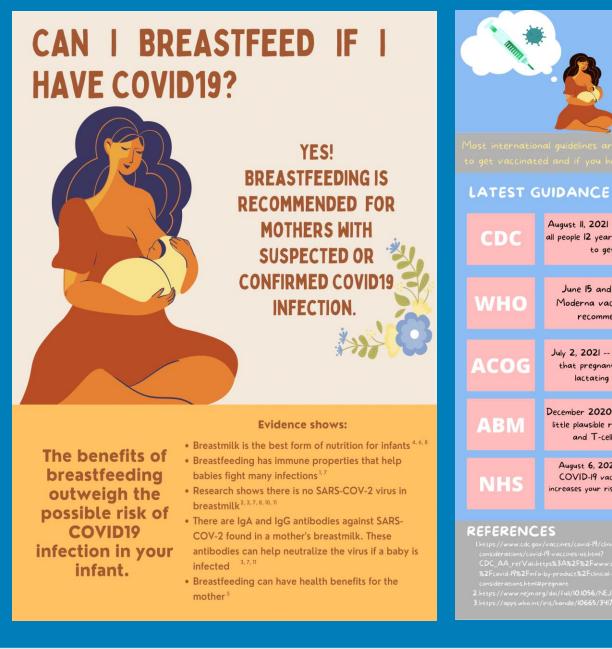


Figure 1: Breastfeeding guidance for women with suspected or confirmed COVID19

Figure 2: Guidance on breastfeeding and COVID19 vaccination

SHOULD I GET

VACCINATED WHILE

BREASTFEEDING OR

August II, 2021 -- the CDC states that COVID-19 vaccination is recommended for

all people 12 years and older, including people who are pregnant, breastfeeding, trying

to get pregnant now, or might become pregnant in the future.

June 15 and 25, 2021 -- the WHO recommends the use of Pfizer and

Moderna vaccines in lactating women as in other adults. WHO does not

recommend discontinuing breastfeeding because of vaccination.

July 2, 2021 -- American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists recommende that pregnant and lactating individuals have equal access to vaccines as non-

lactating individuals as the benefits far outweigh any theoretical risk.

December 2020 -- the Academy of Breastfeeding Medicine stated, "While there is

little plausible risk for the child, there is a biologically plausible benefit. Antibodies and T-cells stimulated by the vaccine may passively transfer into milk."

August 6, 2021 -- The NHS advises: if you're 40 or over, you can have any of the

COVID-19 vaccines but if you're under 40 and do not have a health condition that increases your risk of getting seriously ill from COVID-19, it's preferable for you to have the Pfizer or Moderna vaccine.

#### **RESULTS**

Review of literature and conversations with stakeholders suggest that breastfeeding rates and duration may have decreased as a result of the COVID19 pandemic due to separation of infant-mother dyads, shorter length of stay, lack of breastfeeding support in hospitals and early confusion about the safety of breastfeeding.<sup>3</sup> Stakeholders in Armenia requested health education materials regarding current guidance to support breastfeeding for COVID19 positive mothers and materials to promote vaccination for pregnant and lactating women. (Figures 1 and 2)

#### **FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

Health education materials will be translated, pretested and distributed in Armenia. The research proposal is being developed and aims to further explore experiences of Armenian healthcare providers and mothers as they relate to infant feeding practices during the COVID19 pandemic. This research will lead to policy recommendations to improve breastfeeding rates.

#### REFERENCES

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- 3. Snyder K, Worlton G. Social Support During COVID-19: Perspectives of Breastfeeding Mothers. Breastfeed Med. 2021 Jan;16(1):39-45. doi: 10.1089/bfm.2020.0200. Epub 2020 Dec 23. PMID: 33372829.

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