

Can mothers who have swine flu continue to breastfeed? Yes!

The risk for H1N1 influenza transmission through breast milk is unknown. However, reports of viraemia with seasonal influenza infection are rare. Also unknown is the specific protection to the baby of the antibodies the mother passes through her breastmilk. However the strong recommendations from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)¹ and the UK National Health Service² are **that mothers with swine flu should continue to breastfeed.** Below are suggested answers to questions mothers may ask you.

Can I continue breastfeeding if I get swine flu?

- **YES**, when you have flu your body makes protective substances to fight the flu and these pass via your milk to your baby, and protect him or her too. So continue breastfeeding at least as often as usual. Remember to breastfeed exclusively until your baby is 6 months old.
- Babies who are not breastfed get sick from flu and other infections more often and more severely than babies who are breastfed.
- If you become really sick, express your breastmilk and ask someone else give it to the baby by cup.
- You should also continue breastfeeding if you are given medicine for the flu.

If my baby gets sick can I continue breastfeeding?

- **Yes**, breastfeeding is the best way to feed a sick baby or young child. Feed frequently and on demand day and night - it may be the only food a child wants. Sick babies need more fluids than usual and the fluid in breast milk is better than anything else, even water, because it helps to protect your baby's immune system.
- If your baby is too sick to breastfeed, he or she can drink your expressed milk from a cup.



Reducing transmission

Explain to the mother and other family members that the main way the flu virus is transmitted is by 'droplets' from coughs and sneezes. So the family

can reduce the risk of infecting each other (including mother and baby), and other people by:

- Washing hands with soap frequently and thoroughly, especially after sneezing.
- Not sharing handkerchiefs with anyone.
- If possible, using paper handkerchiefs to cover the nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing, and then burning or burying them.
- Not putting their hands into a baby's mouth, eyes and nose.
- Washing a baby's hands if they have been in her/his mouth.
- Preventing the sharing of toys and other items that children may put in their mouths. Wash thoroughly with soap and water any items that have been in a child's mouth.
- If dummies are used, washing them with soap and water before giving to a baby – and washing afterwards.
- Limiting contact with others. People should stay home when they have swine flu to avoid infecting others.

Advise the family to seek medical advice if anyone (especially a young child) becomes seriously ill, or has a serious health problem such as AIDS.

Note: The symptoms of swine flu can be similar to those of malaria (fever, aches, pains, etc). It is important to exclude and treat malaria before diagnosing swine flu.

References and useful websites

1. Centres for Disease Control and Prevention <http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/breastfeeding.htm> . Check the [CDC H1N1 website](http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/) for the most recent updates.
2. National Health Service UK www.dh.gov.uk/en/Healthcare/Children/Maternity/Maternalandinfantnutrition/DH_099965 and www.ukmicentral.nhs.uk/drugpreg/qrg_p1.asp

See also:

- The Breastfeeding Network www.breastfeedingnetwork.org.uk/drugs-in-breastmilk-information-and-factsheets.html
- *DynaMed* clinical summary for H1N1 flu for health care providers throughout the world. <http://hldemo.ebscohost.com/DynaMed-SwineFlu>

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