

Feeding Your Baby in an Emergency

Information for Parents



Emergencies or disasters are unpredictable events where you and your family may be without electricity, clean drinking water, and transportation. You may not be able to cook or prepare food, or access grocery stores. These events could be the result of severe weather, disease outbreak, man-made disaster or other causes. During an emergency you may be moved from your home to a temporary location, such as an evacuation/reception centre.

Safe feeding practices are the most important way to protect babies from illness in emergency situations.

During an emergency or disaster situation, babies are at highest risk of becoming seriously ill, generally due to diarrheal infections which can be life threatening. This is because their immune systems are not fully developed making them more prone to illness and less able to fight an infection. When babies are ill, they can become dehydrated quickly.

Breastfeeding during an emergency situation will help protect your baby by:

- ensuring your baby has a healthy and stable source of food;
- providing protection (antibodies) in your milk that will help prevent and fight infections;
- providing comfort and warmth; and
- releasing hormones that help a mother feel calm and less stressed, and better able to care for her baby during this stressful event.

Breastfeeding may also provide protection against pregnancy (see below).

If you are breastfeeding:

Continue to breastfeed frequently, whenever your baby shows signs of hunger.

Take care of yourself. Stress does not decrease your milk supply but it can temporarily interfere with the 'letdown' or flow of milk. A quiet, private place to nurse can help. Connecting with other breastfeeding mothers will also provide emotional support.

Know your rights. Breastfeeding is a protected right meaning you can breastfeed whenever and wherever you like, including public spaces and evacuation centres.

Avoid using infant formula unless it is medically indicated. During a disaster well-meaning individuals may try to give formula to mothers with young children. If your baby is showing signs of getting enough (*feeds frequently throughout the day and has six or more wet diapers per day*) then using formula can cause problems such as decreasing your milk supply, and putting your baby at risk due to potential contamination.

Infant formula does not provide any protection from disease or illness. During an emergency, formula may not be available or may become contaminated due to lack of clean water, improper sterilization of equipment, and lack of refrigeration.

If you are using infant formula:

It is safest to use **ready-to-feed**, sterilized formula to avoid potential contamination during an emergency situation.

Be prepared. If you rely on formula, have at least a three day supply of ready-to-feed formula on-hand in case of an emergency.

If your baby receives a combination of breastmilk and infant formula you can put your baby to breast more frequently (as often as possible) to increase the amount of breastmilk your baby receives. Your body will begin to make more milk when you nurse your baby more often. Also, holding your baby skin-to-skin will provide comfort and warmth.

If your baby receives only infant formula, putting your baby to breast several times throughout the day can signal your body to begin making breastmilk again. Some babies may refuse to nurse at first, and may take several attempts to learn or re-learn to breastfeed.

Take care of yourself. Connecting with other parents can provide emotional support making it easier for you to care for your baby and other children during a stressful event.

Can breastfeeding be used as a form of birth control?

Breastfeeding is an effective form of birth control if you can answer “yes” to all of these statements:

- ✓ Your baby is less than six months old.
- ✓ Your monthly period has not returned.
- ✓ Your baby is fully or nearly fully breastfed.*
- ✓ Your baby breastfeeds at least every four hours during the day and at least every six hours at night.

*“Fully breastfed” means that your baby gets all his food from suckling at your breast. “Nearly fully breastfed” means that in addition to breastfeeding and Vitamin D, your baby is only receiving one or two mouthfuls per day of any other fluids or solids.

If you are not planning a pregnancy and have answered “no” to one of the statements, you will need to use another form of birth control.

Help is available!

Public Health Nurses can provide information and support on a variety of child health topics including infant feeding. To speak to a Public Health Nurse call the Family HEALTHline at 705-743-1000.

Useful resources:

[Breastfeeding Help Peterborough](#) provides an inventory of local breastfeeding clinics and supports.

[Are You Thinking of Using Infant Formula?](#) provides detailed information about how to safely prepare, store, and provide infant formula.

[Breastfeeding Matters](#) provides a detailed description of how to position and latch your baby, how to know if your baby is getting enough milk, and frequently asked questions.

[Expressing and Storing Breastmilk](#) discusses hand expression, how to use a breast pump, safe refrigeration times, and situations where you may want to express breastmilk.

Peterborough Public Health works with community partners to plan for emergency situations that could affect you and your family. To learn more about how to develop an emergency preparedness action plan for your family visit <https://beprepared.emergencymanagementontario.ca/myplan/Default.aspx>.