



## The importance of breastfeeding during emergencies

**4 August 2009 - This year the focus of World Breastfeeding Week is on the importance of breastfeeding during emergencies such as war or natural disasters. Emergencies jeopardize the health and survival of large populations, with infants being the most vulnerable. But breastfeeding in emergency situations can be a lifesaver.**

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### Transcript of the podcast

**Veronica Riemer:** You're listening to the WHO podcast, and my name is Veronica Riemer. In this episode, we look at the life-saving role of breastfeeding especially during emergencies.

This week the World Health Organization joins the World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action in celebrating World Breastfeeding Week. This year the focus is on the importance of breastfeeding during emergencies such as war or natural disasters. Emergencies jeopardize the health and survival of large populations, with infants being the most vulnerable. Child mortality can increase significantly due to diarrhoea, respiratory illness and malnutrition. But breastfeeding in emergency situations can be a lifesaver. Dr Kunal Bagchi, Regional Advisor for nutrition and food safety for WHO's South-East Asian region explains:

**Dr Kunal Bagchi:** Breast milk is the ideal food for newborns and infants because it provides all the nutrients that are needed for healthy development. In an emergency situation where basic infrastructure has been compromised, breast milk provides a safe food and contains antibodies that help protect infants from common childhood illnesses like diarrhoea and pneumonia. Another important thing is that it is readily available and affordable, which helps to ensure that infants get adequate sustenance at the time when they need it.

**Veronica Riemer:** Dr Roderico Ofrin, Regional Advisor for Emergency and Humanitarian action for WHO's South East Asia region tells us why breastfeeding in emergency situations has a life-saving role.

**Dr Roderico Ofrin:** In any affected population in emergencies, breastfeeding is an important public health intervention. At the end of the day the goal is to have a camp that supports health, that is what we want, a healthy camp with healthy individuals and healthy population in it, so WHO and its partners, should be looking at breastfeeding as one of the key services and health promoting interventions that should be ensured in a place which houses affected populations. Mothers should be well informed, that yes, you can and you should breastfeed. There should be a place and time provided for them.

**Veronica Riemer:** Dr Constanza Vallenias De Villar, a Medical Officer in WHO's child and adolescent health and development department explains what is needed.

**Dr Cota Vallenias De Villar:** One needs to have skilled health workers, or field workers even if they are not health professionals, who can provide counselling to mothers to help them continue breastfeeding if they are breastfeeding. There is a group called the infant feeding in emergencies core group which is formed by several UN agencies including WHO and NGOs. This group has been very active in developing training materials and operational guidance, explaining what can and can not be done in emergencies. And these materials are being used in many places to train staff and to guide them on what is possible.

**Veronica Riemer:** Infants who are not breastfed are vulnerable to infection and to developing diarrhoea. Following an emergency, one of the first things that is donated is breast milk substitute - often done with the best of intentions, but this can have a negative impact on the health of mothers and children. Dr Bagchi talks about its distribution and why this should be strictly controlled.

**Dr Kunal Bagchi:** There are very specific guidelines developed by WHO by UNHCR and other partner organization which outlines the policy for acceptance, for distribution and use of these milk products in humanitarian crisis operations. WHO has its guidelines

which very specifically establish certain principles related to the use of breastmilk substitutes and to consider the situations very carefully where breastmilk substitutes can be used.

**Veronica Riemer:** But how easy is it for mothers, who are under considerable stress, to breastfeed their babies?

**Dr Constanza Vallenias De Villar:** We know that mothers who are under stress have stopped ejecting milk for perhaps a day or so, but this can be overcome with good support. In fact it is a myth to think that because they are under stressful situations, they won't be able to breastfeed. The thing is to know they need the support. The other myth that is quite common is that people think that because mothers are undernourished, they can not breastfeed or the milk is of very poor quality and that is not true. Even very malnourished mothers can produce good milk, it is in lower quantities it's true, but obviously we don't want to just ensure the baby is in good condition also we want to make sure the mother, if she is malnourished that she receives the nutritional support that she needs.

**Veronica Riemer:** That was Dr Constanza Vallenias De Villar from WHO. If you would like to learn more about this subject, there are links to related information on the transcript page of this podcast episode. Look for the link to the podcast on the home page of our web site, at [www.who.int](http://www.who.int).

That's all for this episode of the WHO podcast. Thanks for listening. If you have any comments on our podcast or have any suggestions for future health topics drop us a line. Our email address is [podcast@who.int](mailto:podcast@who.int).

For the World Health Organization, this is Veronica Riemer in Geneva.

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