

May 18th, 2021

Joint Statement on Infant and Young Child Feeding in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic

As the COVID 19 pandemic is spreading rapidly throughout the country, prohibitory orders restricting the movement of people, have been issued in the majority of districts to interrupt the chain of transmission. These prohibitory orders impact the daily life of the general public. During the period that these prohibitory orders are in force, mothers, caregivers of children and members of the community may have limited access to health services, markets and correct information on optimal infant and young child feeding. Therefore, they will require relevant information, education and support regarding infant and young child feeding (IYCF) practices. There lies a distinct possibility that breastfeeding may be stopped in the event of a child or mother testing positive for COVID-19 or due to the suspicion of COVID-19 infection. The negative health outcomes of stopping breastfeeding outweigh the negative impact on health due to infection transmission. During any emergency, there is a heightened risk of the distribution, donation, promotion and advertisement of Breast Milk Substitutes (including infant formula), other milk products, complementary foods, and feeding equipment (such as bottles and teats). Such products and activities discourage breastfeeding which increases the risk of other disease transmission, malnutrition and death among infants and young children.

Therefore, the Ministry of Health and Population, Department of Health Services, Family Welfare Division along with all relevant agencies concerned with infant and young child nutrition jointly call upon all involved in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic to help secure immediate, coordinated, multi-sectoral action on infant and young child feeding (IYCF) in line with the IYCF guidelines issued by the Government of Nepal in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic response, to protect, promote, and support the feeding and care of infants and young children and to discourage the marketing, promotion, distribution, and donation of Breast Milk Substitutes by implementing the activities mentioned below.

- All health workers and employees of concerned agencies are requested to strictly follow the IYCF Interim Guideline, 2077 issued by the Family Welfare Division in the context of the current COVID-19 pandemic.
- Breastfeeding supports the development of the immune system which helps to combat disease along with providing various other benefits. At present, data are not sufficient to conclude vertical transmission of COVID-19 through breastfeeding. The benefits of breastfeeding substantially outweigh the potential risks for transmission. Infected mothers must continue breastfeeding while taking personal precautionary measures for infection prevention and control which include but are not limited to wearing a mask and maintaining hand hygiene.
- Breastfeeding should be continued while employing personal protective measures even if a child is infected while his/her mother remains uninfected.
- If a mother's health condition is deteriorating and she is suffering from medical complications of COVID-19, the child should be prevented from making direct physical contact with her, breastfeeding must be stopped, and breastmilk must be expressed into a cup and fed to the child while maintaining appropriate hygiene.
- Ensure that infants born to mothers with suspected or confirmed COVID-19 infection are provided with access to health care services and are supported in the early initiation of



breastfeeding, feeding of colostrum, and to exclusively breastfeed, while applying the necessary infection transmission prevention measures and hygiene precautions.

- Breastfeeding mothers should be provided with appropriate support and information on how to safeguard themselves and their children against COVID-19 infection in order to prevent situations where the child is separated from the mother or breastfeeding is stopped.
- Mothers and family members should be counselled effectively to provide age-appropriate, safe, nutritious and diverse complementary foods in sufficient amounts when a child reaches the age of 6 months.
- Make sure that family of pregnant & postnatal women, and children 6 -59months are prioritized during the distribution of food or any kind of aid.
- All stakeholders must follow and ensure that everyone else also follows all the provisions of the Mother's Milk Substitutes (Control of Sale and Distribution) Act, 2049 and Regulation, 2051. It is forbidden to donate, distribute or in any way promote or advertise Breast Milk Substitutes and any violations must be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.
- If COVID-19 infection is confirmed for a pregnant woman, breastfeeding mother or a child, they should be provided with basic psychosocial counselling and support.
- Mothers who are vaccinated should be encouraged to continue breastfeeding to protect their infants.

If you require any additional information regarding IYCF, have any complaints or if you have encountered or heard of any instances that involve the donation, distribution, promotion, or advertisement of Breast Milk Substitutes, please contact the Ministry of Health and Population, Department of Health Services, Family Welfare Division without delay.

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