



Feeding your baby: During an emergency

Emergencies can make it harder to safely feed your baby. Storms, floods, wildfires, earthquakes and power outages can leave you without shelter, supplies, electricity or safe water. Babies are at a higher risk of getting sick because their immune systems are still developing.

There are steps you can take to safely feed your baby human milk (breast milk) or formula during emergencies.

Breastfeeding or chestfeeding

If you're able to, breastfeed or chestfeed often during an emergency. This can help you and your baby stay healthy and calm.

Why is it important to breastfeed or chestfeed during emergencies?

Feeding at the breast or chest is the safest way to feed your baby during emergencies. This is because:

- You might not have access to clean equipment, safe water, and electricity. These are not needed when you breastfeed or chestfeed
- Human milk has antibodies that protect your baby from germs. This includes germs that can cause colds, infections, diarrhea and vomiting

Feeding at the breast or chest also helps:

- Provide a reliable source of nutrition and hydration for your baby. If your baby is less than 6 months old, all they need is human milk, even in hot weather
- Release hormones that help both you and your baby feel calm

Will stress affect my milk supply?

Stress may slow down your milk flow, so your baby may need to take longer to feed. Milk production may decrease if you become dehydrated or feed less often. To help keep up your milk supply, try to:

- Stay hydrated by drinking lots of fluids
- Feed more often, holding your baby safely skin-to-skin. The more frequently your milk is removed, the more milk your body will produce

Expressing and storing human milk

Should I express my milk during emergencies?

Though feeding directly at the breast or chest is the safest option during an emergency, there may be times when this is not possible.

Expressing milk can be helpful if you:

- Are unexpectedly separated from your baby or need to be away from your baby
- Have not breastfed or chestfed for a while and want to start again (relactation)

Milk can be expressed by hand or with a pump. Hand expression is the safer option when you do not have safe water and supplies to clean pump equipment.

To learn how to safely express and store your milk, visit [Baby's Best Chance: Expressing Your Milk \(PDF, 2.2MB\)](#).

Talk with any available health care providers, public health nurses or lactation consultants if you need help expressing your milk.

What if there's a power outage? Is stored human milk still safe to feed my baby?

Keep refrigerator and freezer doors shut whenever possible. When doors are kept shut, milk will stay cold and be safe to use for up to:

- 4 hours in a refrigerator
- 24 hours in a half-full freezer
- 48 hours in a full freezer

If power returns, milk that is partially defrosted but still has ice crystals can be refrozen. If completely

thawed but still cold, put it in the refrigerator and use within 24 hours.

Being separated from baby

If you're temporarily separated from your baby, it's important to:

- Maintain your milk production. You can do this by expressing milk frequently. Whenever possible, safely store expressed milk so it can be offered to your baby later
- Return to feeding at the breast or chest once you and baby are reunited. It may take time for both you and your baby to readjust. Safe skin-to-skin contact and letting your baby come to your breast or chest as often as they like may help. If your baby cannot latch, try expressing milk and feeding it to your baby with a small spoon or cup

Should I consider informal human milk sharing?

During an emergency, you may consider other feeding options, such as informal or peer-to-peer milk sharing. This is when you get human milk from others, such as family members, friends, or online groups. However, human milk from informal sharing is usually not treated to kill harmful bacteria or viruses.

Some parents feel the benefits of human milk outweigh the potential risks of informal milk sharing. Human milk that is informally shared comes with possible health risks. These include:

- Bacterial growth could make your baby sick if human milk is not collected and stored properly
- Contamination with viruses that can be passed to your baby, like HIV, Hepatitis B and Hepatitis C. Some people may have these conditions without knowing it
- Traces of substances that can be harmful for your baby. This includes prescription and non-prescription drugs, herbal products, alcohol, nicotine, tobacco and cannabis
- Dilution with water, cow's milk or other added liquids

When weighing the risks and benefits of informal human milk sharing, consider:

- What you know about the donor's health, lifestyle and blood tests results
- How many donors you will accept milk from. It's best to limit the number of donors

To ensure your baby stays healthy, discuss all feeding options with a health care provider, public health nurse, or lactation consultant before considering informal milk sharing.

Cup feeding

Cup feeding can be used for babies of all ages and is a safe option when feeding at the breast or chest is not possible. Cups are easier to clean than bottles and nipples. Clean disposable cups can be used if supplies cannot be cleaned properly.

To feed your baby with a cup:

- Wash your hands well. If soap and safe water are not available, use hand sanitizer which contains at least 60% alcohol
- Fill a small cup about half full
- Make sure your baby is awake and alert
- If needed, keep their hands tucked in a blanket so they do not bump the cup
- Hold your baby upright, close to your body. Support their head, neck and body
- Hold the rim of the cup at your baby's lower lip
- Gently and slowly tilt the cup so the milk just touches your baby's lip. Do not pour the liquid into their mouth. They'll use their tongue to sip or lap from the cup
- Let your baby control the pace. Keep the cup tilted enough so that they can continue sipping
- Ensure your baby swallows. Take pauses to burp your baby
- Stop when your baby shows you they're full. For example, they may close their mouth, relax their hands, turn their head away or push the cup away

Formula feeding

Infant formula may be used for various reasons, such as when human milk is not available.

What type of formula is safest during an emergency?

Ready-to-feed (RTF) infant formula is the safest option when you do not have safe water. Liquid concentrate or powdered infant formula can be used if you have access to safe water. Some babies are at a higher risk of getting sick from powdered formula because it's not sterile. This includes babies who:

- Were born premature, before 37 weeks of pregnancy, and are under 2 months of age (corrected age)
- Weighed less than 2500 grams (5.5 pounds) at birth and are under 2 months of age
- Have a weakened immune system

How do I know if water is safe for making formula?

Check [current water notices and advisories](#) to see if your tap water is safe. Follow any guidance provided by local authorities. If you're unsure, check with your [health authority contact](#).

If your drinking water comes from your own private well, you're in charge of testing for safety. It's recommended to re-test your water after events like a flood or wildfire to see if the water is still safe to use. Learn more about well water testing here:

[HealthLinkBC File #05b Well Water Testing](#)

How do I make sure formula is safely prepared and used during an emergency?

During an emergency, take extra caution to:

- Use safe water in all steps of formula preparation. Bottled water with an unopened seal can be used if you do not have access to safe tap water
- Use water that's been boiled and cooled when mixing powdered or liquid concentrate formula. If you're not able to boil water, the next safest option is bottled water with an unopened seal
- Only prepare enough formula for one feeding if you cannot store it safely
- Never dilute the formula with extra water

Throw out any leftover formula within 2 hours of feeding.

For detailed steps on making and storing infant formula, see [HealthLinkBC File #69b Feeding your baby formula: Safely making and storing formula](#).

How do I clean and disinfect feeding equipment?

First, wash items with soap and safe water. Then, disinfect items by boiling them in a pot of safe water for 2 minutes. Air dry before using. Find detailed steps here: [Baby's Best Chance: Cleaning and disinfecting feeding equipment \(PDF, 463KB\)](#).

- In an emergency water may be in limited supply. Water may be reused to disinfect equipment if you follow the recommended boil time (2 minutes). When possible, use new water each time you disinfect equipment
- If you're not able to boil water, soak items for 2 minutes in a solution of one teaspoon (5 mL) bleach per 8 cups (2 L) of water. Air dry before using
- Use a disposable cup if you cannot safely clean feeding equipment. See 'Cup Feeding' section above for steps to feed your baby with a cup

Formula supply disruptions

Events like floods, wildfires or supply chain disruptions can impact your access to infant formula. If you cannot find your usual formula, consider the following options:

- Switch to a different size package, type or brand of formula. If your baby needs a special formula because of a medical condition, speak with your community pharmacist. They may be able to find a local source or place a special order
- Try to increase your milk supply if you breastfeed or chestfeed. Feed your baby at the breast or chest, or express your milk more often
- Introduce pasteurized whole cow milk (3.25% milk fat) if your child is between 9 to 12 months old and eating a variety of iron-rich foods

If switching formula, remember:

- You do not need to consult your baby's health care provider before switching, unless your baby has a medical condition such as a food allergy
- Your baby may be gassy or fussy at the start. This should get better in a few days as they adjust
- All infant formulas sold in Canadian stores and pharmacies are reviewed by Health Canada to make sure they're safe

For more tips on what to do if you cannot find your usual formula, visit [Health Canada: Information for families on the limited supply of infant formula](#).

Do not make homemade formula. Many recipes are not safe and do not provide enough nutrients for your baby to grow and develop. If other options for feeding your baby are not available, call 8-1-1 to discuss how to best feed your baby.

Note on terminology: Chestfeeding and human milk are terms that are becoming more commonly used. They're often used by transmasculine or non-binary parents to describe how they feed their baby from their bodies. Chestfeeding, breastfeeding and human milk are used in this handout to ensure that all parents feel represented and included.

For more information

Reach out to your local emergency reception centre for support on accessing safe water, facilities with electricity, and supplies to feed your baby safely. Reception centres are often located in a school or community centre and may be staffed with trained emergency support services volunteers. In an emergency shelter, reach out to staff and volunteers for support.

If you have access to a phone, call **8-1-1** to speak to a registered nurse or registered dietitian.

For more information, see the following:

- HealthLinkBC File #70 Breastfeeding or chestfeeding: <https://www.healthlinkbc.ca/healthlinkbc-files/breastfeeding>
- HealthLinkBC File #49b Disinfecting drinking water: <https://www.healthlinkbc.ca/healthlinkbc-files/disinfecting-drinking-water>
- PreparedBC emergency guides and resources: <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/safety/emergency-management/preparedbc/guides-and-resources>
- Perinatal Services BC: Informal (peer-to-peer) human milk sharing: http://www.perinatalservicesbc.ca/Documents/Guidelines-Standards/HealthPromotion/InformalMilkSharing_FamilyInfo.pdf
- Perinatal Services BC: Safe Position for Skin-to-Skin Contact: http://www.perinatalservicesbc.ca/Documents/Health-info/Newborn-care/PSBC_Skin-to-Skin_Fact_Sheet.pdf

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