

COVID-19 (Coronavirus)

Information for parents with infants and young children

Victorian Maternal and Child Health Service 27 March 2020

We understand that many parents are likely to be feeling anxious or concerned about their children's health and wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic. Parents should be reassured that the evidence so far is babies and children under five almost never get seriously ill from COVID-19.

To keep up to date with the latest information and advice about COVID-19 visit: www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/coronavirus.

Maternal and Child Health Care access is different

Parents are understandably concerned about the risks of exposure to COVID-19 for their children and are unsure whether to attend maternal and child health appointments, or group sessions.

To limit the spread of COVID-19 in the community, Maternal and Child Health (MCH) services are adopting alternative modes of service delivery including telephone or electronic consultations but will continue to provide services to families. Group sessions will cease until further notice.

Please contact your local MCH service for local information on change of service delivery and remember the 24-hour MCH Line is always available on 13 22 29.

Feeding your baby

Breastfeeding

Many parents may have questions as to whether they should continue to breastfeed or breastfeed if they are unwell.

Breast milk contains many ingredients to help prevent and fight infection. It is recommended babies be fed only breast milk until they are six months old and continue breastfeeding with other foods into their second year of life.

The latest advice from the Australian Breastfeeding Association is to **keep breastfeeding, even if you are unwell**:

www.breastfeeding.asn.au/bfinfo/covid-19

If your baby is under six months and breastfeeding, offering them only breast milk protects them from a range of infections and reduces their need for medical treatment or hospitalisation.

If your baby is breastfeeding and using formula, consider replacing formula feeds with breastfeeds. Consult your MCH nurse/GP/Paediatrician for advice.

If you have stopped breastfeeding altogether, it is possible to start breastfeeding again if you want to. Contact the national Breastfeeding Helpline on 1800 686 268 for assistance.

If you have an older baby or toddler who is still breastfeeding, continued breastfeeding will help protect them from other illnesses until after the coronavirus pandemic has passed.



COVID-19 and breastfeeding.

Breastmilk provides protection against many illnesses.

Keep breastfeeding even if you are sick.



If you need help with breastfeeding, or want to restart, call 1800 686 268.



Visit breastfeeding.asn.au

The National Breastfeeding Helpline is supported by funding from the Australian Government.

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If you're using formula

It is easy to accidentally introduce germs into bottles while you're preparing infant formula.

Be extra careful about preparing bottles. This means always washing your hands thoroughly with soap, washing bottles thoroughly, sterilising them after every use, and making up formula with boiled water cooled to lukewarm or room temperature. See <https://raisingchildren.net.au/newborns/breastfeeding-bottle-feeding/bottle-feeding/formula-making-storing-transporting> for instructions on formula making.

Remember before feeding your baby, test the temperature of the formula by placing a few drops on the inside of your wrist, it should feel just warm.

Access to formula

If you are formula feeding, buy enough infant formula for three weeks but check the expiry dates.

In Australia, commercial infant formula or baby formula is the only safe alternative to breastmilk for infants for the first 12 months. Every infant formula you can buy in Australia meets strict Australian Standards.

- If you are having difficulty accessing your regular brand of infant formula, ensure that you read the preparation instructions carefully as dosages can vary between brands.
- Babies under 12 months of age should not have as the main milk source:
 - normal cow's milk
 - skim evaporated, powdered or sweetened condensed milk
 - dairy alternatives like soy, rice, almond or coconut milk
- Homemade infant formula or diluted milks (of any of the above) are not a safe alternative to breastmilk or commercial infant formula for babies under 12 months.
- The use of 'follow-on formula' for infants aged 6–12 months is not considered necessary and no studies have shown advantages over using 'infant formula'.
- The use of formula for infants at risk of allergy or with cow's milk allergy needs to be on the advice of MCH Nurse, General Practitioner or Paediatrician.
- Consider accessing formula through supermarkets, pharmacies, online stores or contacting formula companies directly.
- If you are unable to access formula, please contact your MCH service or the MCH Line for further advice.

What can I do to reduce my risk of coronavirus infection?

- Wash hands often with soap and running water, for at least 20 seconds. Dry with paper towel or hand dryer.
- Try not to touch your eyes, nose or mouth.
- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze. If you don't have a tissue cough or sneeze into your upper sleeve or elbow.
- Stay at home if you feel sick. If you take medication make sure you have enough.
- Phone your doctor or the hotline – 1800 675 398 – if you need medical attention. They will tell you what to do.
- Continue healthy habits: exercise, drink water, get plenty of sleep.
- Wearing a face mask is not necessary if you are well.
- Buy an alcohol-based hand sanitiser with over 60 per cent alcohol.

What to do if you or a family member gets coronavirus?

Mothers are more at risk of becoming sick from the COVID-19 than their babies. If you're breastfeeding and you're infected, it is recommended you continue breastfeeding. That's because the virus has not been found in breastmilk.

Wearing a mask when you are with your baby (including during feeding), washing hands before and after contact with your baby, and cleaning and disinfecting surfaces and any feeding equipment will help prevent your baby catching the virus from you.

If mothers are hospitalised or separated from your baby, you can express breastmilk for them.

Family members who need to isolate must stay at home and not attend public places, work, school, childcare or university.

A factsheet has been developed to support anyone who has been asked to self-isolate due to COVID-19.

Factsheets are also available for close contacts and suspected cases:

- [Factsheet – confirmed case \(Word\)](#)
- [Factsheet – suspected case \(Word\)](#)
- [Factsheet – close contact \(Word\)](#)

What else can you do?

Keeping grandparents and anyone with pre-existing medical conditions safe

Many people will suffer only mild symptoms; however, early indications are that the elderly and people with pre-existing medical conditions such as heart and lung disease are more at risk of experiencing severe symptoms. Aboriginal people can also be at greater risk given they experience higher rates of chronic disease.

If you or your partner get ill, someone else may need to help care for the baby or other children. Babies like to share their saliva with their caregivers, and they may be infected with the coronavirus but have no symptoms. So they may easily spread the infection to the people looking after them.

Many parents call on grandparents to help with childcare. Unfortunately people over 65 are the most likely to get seriously ill or die from the coronavirus.

So, if your standby carers are over 65 years, or 50 years and over for Aboriginal carers, or have a pre-existing medical condition, now is the time to think about making alternate childcare arrangements.

Talk with grandparents or other carers about how they can reduce their risk of infection if they need to look after the baby.

Read the [Coronavirus disease \(COVID-19\) factsheet for people aged over 65 years \(Word\)](#) for more information.

Baby necessities

Some supply chains may be disrupted if many people are unwell and you may not be able to shop if you need to self-isolate at home.

It is recommended you have two to three weeks' worth of supplies at home to prepare for this possibility. Consider stocking up on nappies for this length of time or keeping washable (cloth) nappies on hand.

Make sure vaccinations are up to date

Routine vaccination is the safest, most effective way to protect babies and children from illness.

So, keep your child's vaccinations up to date to minimise the chance they'll need medical attention while the health system is dealing with COVID-19.

Hygiene for you and your baby

The best thing you can do is to practice good hygiene yourself and your family.

Good hygiene includes:

- covering your coughs and sneezes with your elbow or a tissue
- disposing of tissues properly
- washing your hands often with soap and water, including before and after eating and after going to the toilet
- using alcohol-based hand sanitisers
- cleaning and disinfecting surfaces
- if you are sick, avoiding contact with others and staying more than 1.5 metres away from people
- cleaning and sanitising frequently used objects such as mobiles, keys and wallets

Because babies put their hands in their mouths, frequently washing their face and hands and cleaning surfaces and objects they might touch will help protect them from any infection.

Surgical masks for you and your family

Surgical masks in the community are only helpful in preventing people who have coronavirus disease from spreading it to others.

If you and your children are well, your family **do not** need to wear a surgical mask. There is little evidence that widespread use of surgical masks in healthy people prevents transmission in public.

Medical Assistance

The Australian government recently announced special provisions for parents of newborns to be bulk-billed when consulting a doctor or nurse via phone or videocall rather than in person.