

Afghan families in crisis and infant feeding

This leaflet is for people who are helping Afghan refugees but do not have training in supporting infant feeding.

Introduction

Breastfeeding is very much the cultural norm in Afghanistan with over 90% of babies breastfed and a mean duration of 23 months. It therefore needs to be protected for its cultural importance as well as for the health benefits it provides for mother and baby. Unfortunately, the very low breastfeeding duration rates in the UK can mean that breastfeeding is readily undermined, for example by formula being provided to families inappropriately, and well-intentioned but unhelpful comments made to mothers who are breastfeeding.

Guidance

The Unicef UK Baby Friendly guide for local authorities '[Infant feeding during the coronavirus \(Covid-19\) crisis](#)' is highly relevant and includes a section on protecting breastfeeding. As the guide states, local midwifery, health visiting and infant feeding teams provide infant feeding support. Sometimes, however, that is not enough. Below are listed relevant written resources plus helplines provided by breastfeeding support charities which parents can access.

Resources

This NHS website for parents provides basic information in English about breastfeeding and contact details of charities which can help, including helplines: [NHS website](#)

Helpline (for those who speak English) opening times:

- National Breastfeeding Helpline: 0300 100 0212 (9.30am – 9.30pm)
- NCT: 0300 330 0700 (8.00am to midnight)
- Association of Breastfeeding Mothers: 0300 330 5453 (9.30am -10.30pm)
- La Leche League: 0345 120 2918 (8.00am to 11.00pm)

WBTi has a [webpage listing resources](#), including some in Afghan languages.

The list of resources includes:

'Flyer on IYCF Feeding Support in Transit' in [Farsi](#) (Dari and Farsi are dialects of the same language): which may be particularly useful.

(The acronym 'IYCFE' stands for 'Infant and Young Child Feeding in Emergencies'.)

WHO International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes

The aim of the [WHO International Code](#) (1981) and subsequent resolutions is to protect all infants from commercial influences, such as advertising, on their parents' decision-making about infant feeding. If infant formula is needed for a baby, it should be purchased. Manufacturers and distributors of formula should **not** provide free supplies as this can easily lead to formula being given inappropriately to mothers who are breastfeeding.

Parents who are using infant formula

Whether a parent is already using infant formula or uses it temporarily until breastfeeding improves, ready-to-feed formula is safer, as it is sterile, but more expensive. If the parent is using powdered formula it is essential that the powder is made up correctly. The water needs to be boiled (to sterilise it) and allowed to cool to 70C before adding the correct amount of powder. Water at 70C is hot enough to sterilise the formula powder and mixes with the powder better than at higher temperatures. Here are instructions for making up a bottle and [using a bottle to feed](#).

Using formula safely requires access to a kettle and hygienic kitchen area where equipment can be washed thoroughly and then sterilised. Cups are easier to clean than bottles so are preferable where cleaning facilities are limited.

Possible situations that may arise and what you can do to help

Scenario 1: a mother thinks her milk has dried up so she needs to give her baby infant formula.

If a mother is feeling very stressed, the stress hormones will slow the release of milk. Helping the mother to relax, by showing that there are people who care about her, checking she is comfortable and has refreshments, and encouraging her to breathe more slowly, can help the milk to flow. She is very likely to benefit from support with breastfeeding – from a health professional or by speaking to a breastfeeding counsellor on one of the helplines.

Scenario 2: A mother with a very young baby says breastfeeding is too painful for her to continue.

If she has a phone with credit, the mother can be reminded of the online written information available about helping a baby attach well to the breast. She needs to have contact with a health professional or phone a helpline urgently to protect her breastfeeding.

Scenario 3: A mother says she needs formula because she's in the UK and that's how babies are fed.

She can be informed that breastfeeding is much better for the health of both baby and mother. The World Health Organisation strongly encourages breastfeeding and the UK government would like more babies to be breastfed.