

# Breastfeeding and Covid-19: Busting the myths

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We've had an overload of fake news over the past pandemic months. One of the most damaging falsehoods to emerge has been that Covid-19 positive moms can transmit the virus through breast milk to their little ones, and should stop breastfeeding. Spokesperson for [ADSA](#) (The Association for Dietetics in South Africa), Andiswa Ngqaka, a registered dietitian says: "There are anecdotes from various countries indicating that this misinformation is causing moms to avoid breastfeeding during the pandemic. While some may see infant formula as a 'safer alternative' during this time, this is not the case. Breast milk is the safest and most nutritious food for babies, and Covid-19 does not change that."



## ***There is no evidence of Covid-19 transmission through breast milk***

As the medical profession's foremost experts in nutrition, registered dietitians are constantly keeping up to date with the latest scientific evidence. Worldwide, there is currently no evidence that breastfed babies have been infected by mothers who have tested positive to Covid-19. Ngqaka explains: "The WHO (World Health Organisation) cites one study where there was a detection of non-infectious Covid-19 viral RNA in breast milk, and this is definitely not the same thing as finding a viable and infective virus. Therefore, there is unanimous agreement across international health organisations that moms can have complete peace of mind breastfeeding their children through the pandemic, even if they are Covid-19+ or suspect they might be infected. The benefits of skin-to-skin contact with your baby and breastfeeding as normal are overwhelmingly immune-boosting and protective of your baby's health."

Lisanne du Plessis, Associate Professor at Stellenbosch University and ADSA spokesperson, gives her **top five tips for breastfeeding moms during the pandemic**:

1. Mothers should breastfeed on demand, whenever the baby wants to breastfeed, day and night.
2. Breastfeed exclusively for six months. Breast milk provides all the food and water that babies need during this time. Breast milk also protects babies against sickness or infection.
3. Do not give any other food or liquids to babies, not even water, during the first six months of life. Even during very hot weather, breastmilk will satisfy babies' thirst.
4. Giving babies under six months anything other than breast milk will cause them to suckle less, will reduce the amount of breast milk that a mother produces and may make babies sick.
5. Practice hygienic measures to protect moms and babies against Covid-19 and other harmful bacteria and viruses in our environments.

### ***Breastfeeding is food security for babies***

Breastfeeding from birth supports the healthy development of babies and plays an important role in prevention of all forms of childhood malnutrition including wasting, stunting, obesity and underweight and micronutrient deficiencies. Breast milk protects against many infections including Covid-19. At a time when many South African families are facing serious food shortages, breast milk provides complete food security for babies under six months, and boosts nutrition and health for other young ones. Breastfeeding saves on the food budget, making more money available to feed the family. When it comes to food, you can't get anything safer, more convenient and more economical than breastmilk. "It would make good sense to see a boost in breastfeeding across South Africa at this time," says Du Plessis.

### ***What precautions should a Covid-19+ mom take?***

The WHO provides the following [breastfeeding guidelines](#) if you suspect or know you have Covid-19:

- Wash hands frequently with soap and water for at least 20 seconds or use alcohol-based hand rub and especially before touching the baby;
- Wear a medical mask during any contact with the baby, including while feeding;
- Sneeze or cough into a tissue. Then dispose of it immediately and wash hands for at least 20 seconds again;
- Routinely clean and disinfect surfaces that you have touched.

It is vital that partners, family and friends support breastfeeding moms who may be Covid-19 infected. They need to understand that there is no evidence that the virus is transmitted through breast milk, and that by continuing breastfeeding, the mother is doing the best she can do to protect her baby from Covid-19.

### ***What should happen if you're just too ill to breastfeed?***

Ngqaka says: "If you're too ill to breastfeed, try to express your milk for your baby and give it with a clean cup or spoon and cup. Expressing breast milk is important to sustain your milk production so that you can carry on breastfeeding when you recover. If you can't express your breast milk, you can consider donor human milk. Wet nursing is another option if culturally acceptable to you. Your last option would be to provide a breast milk substitute. Reunite with your baby as soon as you recover. Get support if you need help re-lactating and bonding with your baby."

### ***Get Messages for Mothers – M4M***

A global pandemic is certainly not the easiest time to be a new mom and the mom of young children. Mothering babies and small children is often an isolating experience at the best of times, so now, with social distancing and staying-at-home, you may need to make some extra efforts to ensure you are well-supported at this critical parenting time. [Grow Great](#), a campaign to prevent stunting by 2030, partnered with other NGOs Embrace, ilifa labantwana and the Perinatal Mental Health Project, to launch Messages4Mothers, a new digital platform to connect with South African moms during the pandemic. Messages for Mothers can be accessed at [M4M](#) or you can connect with Grow Great on social media [@GrowGreatza](#) on both Twitter and Facebook. Grow Great communications specialist Duduzile Mkhize says: "Some of the biggest concerns for mothers are around how they can safely continue to breastfeed their children while dealing with Covid-19. Some mothers are essential workers and they worry about how they can continue to keep their families safe. Mothers of small children worry about taking them for immunisations as they fear clinics might not be safe. Pregnant mothers who have to go for checks ups also worry about this. Covid-19 lockdown has caused a lot of anxiety for many people, so many mothers ask questions about how to cope with anxiety and depression."

### ***You're not alone***

On a daily basis, the M4M platform provides accurate and reliable information for mothers by answering frequently asked questions. These questions are gathered from social media platforms of all the partners and the Grow Great WhatsApp groups and campaigns. You will find reliable updated Covid-19 information as well as support for breastfeeding and practical advice for coping with the challenges of motherhood during the pandemic.

[World Breastfeeding Week](#) takes place from Saturday, 1 August to Friday, 7 August. The local 2020 campaign theme is **Support breastfeeding for a healthier South Africa**. The Department of Health and its partners, including ADSA, appeal to the country to fully support and encourage breastfeeding mothers who are protecting their babies against many infections, including Covid-19. Through breastfeeding on demand, mothers also protect their baby's vital source of immune-boosting breastmilk and help their babies thrive through close mother-and-child contact.

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## About ADSA

ADSA, the Association for Dietetics in South Africa, is one of the country's professional organisations for registered dietitians. It is a registered non-profit organisation served by qualified volunteers. The Association represents, and plays a vital role in developing the dietetic profession so as to contribute towards the goal of achieving optimal nutrition for all South Africans. Through its network of ten branches ADSA provides dietitians with the opportunity to meet and network with other professionals in their provinces. Through its comprehensive Continuing Professional Development (CPD) system, ADSA supports dietitians in meeting their mandatory on-going learning, which is essential to maintain their registration status with the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA).

To find a registered dietitian in your area, visit: <http://www.adsa.org.za>

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