



Infant and Young Child Feeding in Emergencies

Call for Action

Thursday 12 November 2020

Infants and young children are vulnerable in emergencies due to their immature immune systems, very specific food and fluid needs, and reliance on others for care needs¹. The summer of 2019–2020 generated the need for emergency responses across Australia due to bushfire. No consistent support was provided to those caring for infants and young children, including regarding their feeding. As a result, infant health was placed at risk due to premature cessation of breastfeeding and unsafe formula feeding practices. The COVID-19 pandemic has further disrupted health services, adding to anxiety and stress for new mothers about their child's health and development.

Emergencies in Australia are commonly associated with heat, disruption of water, power, and food supplies, reduction in communication and health services, and with a need for evacuation to locations with limited amenities¹. These conditions heighten the importance of supporting mothers to continue breastfeeding where ever possible. They also mean that formula dependent infants require targeted support to enable continuity of supply of safe infant formula, safe water, power, and health care.

However, the need to protect, promote, and support appropriate and safe infant feeding in emergencies (IYCF-E) has been overlooked in Australian emergency planning. In 2018, WBTi Australia audited Federal and State and Territory government emergency planning and revealed a dearth of content dealing with the needs of infants and young children at all levels of government¹. It found that no government agency has responsibility for ensuring that infants and young children are protected, through well-coordinated and appropriate emergency planning and response.

In 2019, Australian Federal and State and Territory governments endorsed the Australian National Breastfeeding Strategy. Australian governments agreed it was a national priority that a policy on infant and young child feeding in emergencies be developed and that skilled breastfeeding and lactation support be available during emergencies². In 2018, Australia as a member of the World Health Assembly also agreed that all countries should:

'Take all necessary measures to ensure evidence-based and appropriate infant and young child feeding during emergencies, including through preparedness plans, capacity-building of personnel working in emergency situations, and coordination of intersectoral operations'³.

National, State, Territory, and Local Governments, logistics and evacuation centre managers, health workers, nutrition experts, and child protection workers should support caregivers of infants to mitigate the adverse impacts of emergencies on their feeding, health, and wellbeing. However, they cannot do so without planning and guidance identifying and addressing their needs. World Health Assembly-endorsed guidance on IYCF-E exists to guide governments and non-government organisations on how to ensure appropriate aid delivery. However, this guidance has not been adapted to the Australian context.

We urge the Australian Government to protect the health and wellbeing of infants in future emergencies by taking the following actions:

1. Urgently designate the Australian Government Department of Health as the national agency responsible for providing advice and support to the states and territories on IYCF-E in the Commonwealth Disaster Response Plan.
2. Establish and appropriately fund a national advisory committee on IYCF-E, composed of stakeholders from governments, academe, emergency and health-related non-government organisations, and excluding commercial interests, to adapt international IYCF-E guidance to the Australian context and develop national planning principles for IYCF-E .
3. Commission the Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience to develop an Emergency Handbook on children including IYCF-E.
4. Include detailed advice for health workers on how to support mothers and other caregivers of infants in emergency preparedness, and in the feeding and care of infants and young children during emergencies in the updated National Health and Medical Research Council's Infant Feeding Guidelines for Health Workers

References

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2. COAG Health Council. Australian National Breastfeeding Strategy: 2019 and Beyond. Canberra: Department of Health 2019.
3. Sixty-Third World Health Assembly: Infant and Young Child Nutrition. WHA 6323 2010.

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