

Breastfeeding provides the best protection for infants in emergencies

Colombo, 31 May, 2017: The Ministry of Health, Nutrition and Indigenous Medicine, World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) appeal to all relevant parties to be mindful of the continued need for breastfeeding of infants during the current flood and landslide emergency, and caution against unnecessary and potentially harmful donations and use of infant formula and powdered milk.

In emergency situations where food supplies and access to safe water is extremely limited, infants and children in affected areas remain highly vulnerable to diarrhea and other diseases. Breast milk can provide the critical nutrients and immune support to infants which can help protect against infections. The health risks for babies who are not breastfed can be significantly higher. Every effort should be taken to protect and support breastfeeding among all breastfeeding mothers affected by the disaster.

All infants up to 6 months of age should be exclusively breastfed even during a time of disaster. Children up to the age of 2 years and beyond should be given breast milk along with safe and adequate complementary feeding as per the national guidelines. Giving infant formula during a disaster situation can easily create a double disaster, as infants given formula will invariably develop diarrheal diseases and lead to higher risk of death.

“We are facing a severe challenge with the current emergency and this can lead to risk of sickness and disease among children” said Dr. Sarath Amunugama actg. Director General of Health Services of the Ministry of Health. “Continued breastfeeding is critical to ensure good health and well-being of infants and toddlers up to 2 years of age”.

Due to the risks associated with the preparation of formula and powdered milk in an emergency situation where clean water, clean pots and cooking facilities are not available, the health risks to infants who are not breastfed is significantly higher. Donations of formula milk increases the vulnerability of infants exposing them to infection, diarrhea and other severe complications. Hence donations of formula milk or powdered milk must be avoided in emergencies. Where necessary, for orphaned infants it will be supplied by the Ministry of Health, Nutrition and Indigenous Medicine (MoH) or the Provincial/District level health authorities.

It is important not to lose sight of what is best for infants and children and to foster an environment in which mothers are encouraged to continue breastfeeding and safe complementary feeding in the difficult circumstances following the flood and landslide disaster.

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