

An Open Letter to Health Care Providers Attending to Families Affected by Hurricane Katrina: The Role of Human Milk and Breastfeeding

You are caring for children and adults under the most stressful and distressing situations during this post-Katrina period. We all thank you and honor you for this heroic effort. Please consider the value of human milk and breastfeeding as an important component of this care of both young children and their mothers. Human milk is a valuable resource that can not only protect the vulnerable infant from disease, but can also promote psychological health and comfort during stressful times. Human milk reduces pain and promotes more rapid healing after injuries and infections. While maternal health is of great importance, it should be recognized that even the malnourished mother will produce milk of good quality for her infant.

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) states that “breastfeeding ensures the best possible health as well as the best developmental and psychosocial outcomes for infants.” Under situations of displacement, poor sanitation, inadequate food resources, threats of infection, and severe anxiety, human milk and breastfeeding have a particularly important role to play in protecting the vulnerable infant from infection and psychological trauma. One example of this protection is the remarkable reduction in diarrhea in breastfed infants who are exposed to shigella, a common cause of dysentery.

During this post-Katrina, health care workers should make every effort to promote breastfeeding of newborn infants by:

- 1) urging pregnant women to breastfeed immediately after delivery of their infant,
- 2) urging new mothers to start breastfeeding at any time during the early weeks after birth
- 3) urging breastfeeding mothers to continue exclusive breastfeeding for six months
- 4) urging breastfeeding mothers to continue breastfeeding for at least one year and longer, even after starting other foods.

La Leche League International and the Section on Breastfeeding of the American Academy of Pediatrics, as well as many other experts on breastfeeding stand ready to assist you in your efforts to promote, protect and support breastfeeding and the use of human milk.

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