



**World Health
Organization**

WORLD BREASTFEEDING WEEK 2009

Breastfeeding: A Vital Emergency Response. Are you ready?

The World Health Organization (WHO) is pleased to join the World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action in celebrating World Breastfeeding Week from 1 to 7 August 2009. This year's theme emphasizes the need to consider breastfeeding as a life-saving intervention before and during emergencies.

An emergency is an extraordinary and extreme situation that immediately puts the health and survival of a population at risk. Children are among the most vulnerable groups during emergencies, and small children are the most vulnerable of all, due to the combined increased risk of death due to diarrhoea, pneumonia and undernutrition.

The Global Strategy for Infant and Young Child Feeding outlines actions to improve infant and young child feeding in emergencies, which are an exceptionally difficult circumstance. The best way of preventing malnutrition and mortality among infants and young children in emergencies or otherwise, is to ensure that they start breastfeeding within one hour of birth, breastfeed exclusively (with no food or liquid other than breast milk, not even water) until six months of age and continue breastfeeding with appropriate complementary foods up to two years or beyond. Even in emergency situations, the aim should be to create and sustain an environment that encourages frequent breastfeeding for children up to two years of age or beyond.

Unfortunately, however, there is a widespread misconception that mothers cannot breastfeed adequately due to stress or inadequate nutrition. Frequently, news from devastated areas report stories of mothers who have given birth and are "not producing enough breast milk". During emergencies, unsolicited or uncontrolled donations of breast-milk substitutes may undermine breastfeeding and should be avoided. The focus should rather be on active protection and support of breastfeeding by for example establishing safe 'corners' for mothers and infants, one-to-one counselling and mother-to-mother support.

As part of emergency preparedness, hospitals and other health care services should have trained health workers who can help mothers establish breastfeeding and/or overcome difficulties. The Baby-friendly Hospital Initiative and the WHO/UNICEF *Breastfeeding Counselling: A training course* may be included in emergency preparedness plans. The Infant Feeding in Emergencies Core Group which involves a range of partners including WHO, has developed an *Operational Guidance for Emergency Relief Staff and Programme Managers*, which provides concise and practical guidance on how to ensure appropriate infant and young child feeding in emergency preparedness and response. The *Operational Guidance* reflects the WHO Guiding Principles for feeding infants and young children during emergencies, and has integrated the *International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes* to highlight the issue of donations of breast milk substitutes, bottles and teats in emergencies.

The theme of the World Health Day 2009 was *Save lives. Make hospitals safe in emergencies*. I am pleased that this year's breastfeeding week builds upon this theme and extends it with actions in the community. Emergencies do increase risks of infant and young child mortality, however with appropriate action, we can save these precious lives.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'm. chan'.

Dr Margaret Chan
Director-General