

Living with HIV & breastfeeding

Antiretroviral treatment means that mothers living with HIV can breastfeed safely.

Read our factsheet for more information on feeding your baby.

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Sources:
www.avert.org/fact-sheet-sources



Antiretroviral treatment (ART) reduces the amount of HIV in breastmilk, which minimises the risk of passing HIV on.

This means that for mothers on ART, without access to clean water, breastfeeding is the safest option.



Benefits of breastfeeding



Taking ART as your doctor prescribes means that it is possible to breastfeed without passing HIV on.



Your breastmilk is very nutritious and can offer your baby immune support in the first few months.



Formula feeding can be dangerous if you cannot always access clean, boiled water.



Formula feed made with dirty, unsterilised water puts your baby at risk of other illnesses such as diarrhoea, which can be more dangerous for their health.



Breastfeeding provides a more reliable source of food if you cannot always access or afford to buy good formula feed.

How to breastfeed safely



Take your antiretroviral treatment (ART) exactly as prescribed.



Breastfeed exclusively (don't give your baby other foods) for the first 6 months at least.



After 6 months, you can choose to slowly start to introduce other soft foods.



It's recommended that you continue breastfeeding for between 12 to 24 months.

It's really important to go to follow-up appointments to monitor your and your baby's health while breastfeeding.

How to stop breastfeeding

-  Don't stop breastfeeding until you can provide your baby with a safe and nutritious alternative food.
-  Gradually wean your baby off breastmilk, reducing it over one month.
-  Talk to your healthcare worker for advice on which foods are safe to give your baby.
-  Once you have stopped breastfeeding, don't start again.



How to keep your baby healthy

Does my baby need HIV treatment?

Yes – your baby should receive HIV treatment for the first few weeks of life to prevent HIV infection.



Does my baby need an HIV test?

Yes – your baby should have an HIV test at 4–6 weeks (or earlier), when you finish breastfeeding, and at 18 months.



What if my baby is positive?

They will need to start long-term HIV treatment to stay healthy.

Exclusively breastfeed for up to 24 months.



What do I do if I don't have access to either HIV treatment or safe formula feed?

It is still advised that you exclusively breastfeed for at least the first 6 months and only introduce other foods when you have reliable access to a safe alternative. Talk to a healthcare worker for more advice.



How to stay healthy while breastfeeding

It is important that you look after your health while you are breastfeeding.



Always take your ART



Get plenty of rest



Eat well



You should also avoid getting cracked nipples. Speak to your healthcare worker if you find that your nipples bleed or develop any sores.

Know your rights

You have the right to:

- ✓ breastfeed your baby
- ✓ use baby formula feed
- ✓ stop breastfeeding.



Formula feeding



In most high income countries it is advised that women living with HIV use formula feed instead of breastfeeding.



This is because good quality formula feed and clean, boiled water are widely accessible and affordable.



This means any risks around water-borne diseases or malnutrition have been eliminated.



At the moment women with undetectable viral loads in these countries are still advised to formula feed.

This is because scientists are still gathering the data needed to completely rule-out the risk of transmission via breastfeeding for women with undetectable viral loads.

How to formula feed safely

Formula feed must be:

- ✓ made with clean, boiled water
- ✓ stored in sterile cups or bottles
- ✓ refrigerated and used within 24 hours.

Wherever you live, speak to your healthcare worker if you need more help deciding whether or not to breastfeed.

