



UNOG Bi-weekly press briefing COVID-19 and Breastfeeding WHO 04AUG2020

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Shotlist

1. Exterior wide shot, UN Geneva, Palais des Nations, flag alley, a beautiful day (stock).
2. **SOUNDBITE (English) — Laurence M. Grummer-Strawn, Unit Head, Food and Nutrition Action in Health Systems, World Health Organization (WHO): “WHO has been very clear in its recommendations to say absolutely breastfeeding should continue. These are new mothers and that they should initiate early have their baby skin-to-skin with them...no change from our standard recommendations. The reason for that are that the risks of transmission of the COVID-19 virus from a COVID-positive mother to her baby seem to be extremely low.”**
3. Exterior medium shot, UN Geneva, Palais des Nations, flag alley, a beautiful day (stock).
4. **SOUNDBITE (English) — Laurence M. Grummer-Strawn, Unit Head, Food and Nutrition Action in Health Systems, World Health Organization (WHO): “The interruption of services has been tremendous around the world providing the kind of support mothers normally would get with breastfeeding. Oftentimes the health services that would provide maternal child health have been devoted to take care of the COVID response; sometimes families do not feel comfortable in going into the health services, because they’re afraid that they might get COVID and so they don’t come for the routine kinds of support.”**
5. Exterior wide shot, UN Geneva, Pregny Gate, Palais des Nations (stock).

6. **SOUNDBITE (English) — Laurence M. Grummer-Strawn, Unit Head, Food and Nutrition Action in Health Systems, World Health Organization (WHO): “We have never documented, anywhere around the world, any transmission through breastmilk.”**
7. Exterior wide shot, UN Geneva, Palais des Nations, flag alley, a beautiful day (stock).
8. **SOUNDBITE (English) — Laurence M. Grummer-Strawn, Unit Head, Food and Nutrition Action in Health Systems, World Health Organization (WHO): “We have tested the breastmilk of many mothers around the world, a variety of studies. And a few studies have found a few kind of random – odd - samples that have had particles of the virus in them, so they have tested positive. When they followed up to see whether the virus was actually viable and could be infective, they did not find any actual infective virus.”**
9. Exterior medium shot, UN Geneva, Palais des Nations flag alley seen from the Places des Nations (stock)
10. **SOUNDBITE (English) — Laurence M. Grummer-Strawn, Unit Head, Food and Nutrition Action in Health Systems, World Health Organization (WHO): “We have documented through modelling that about 820,000 children’s lives are lost every year because of a lack of breastfeeding and economically, there are losses of about \$300 billion a year in economic activity, lost because of a lack of breastfeeding.”**
11. Exterior medium shot, UN Geneva, Palais des Nations, flag alley, a beautiful day (stock).
12. **SOUNDBITE (English) — Laurence M. Grummer-Strawn, Unit Head, Food and Nutrition Action in Health Systems, World Health Organization (WHO): “Breastfeeding provides benefits during the time of breastfeeding, and those that are most recognised are protection against diarrhoea, which is one of the top causes of mortality in low-income countries, protection against respiratory infections, against obesity – childhood obesity – as children get older, protection against leukaemia. In addition, breastfeeding protects the mother against breast cancer, ovarian cancer, Type 2 diabetes later on, so there are benefits for both the mother and the baby, and when we added these up it comes out to about 820,000 lives around the world, even in high-income countries.”**
13. External medium shot, anti-war sculpture, looking out onto Place des Nations, Geneva, with UN Geneva beyond.
14. **SOUNDBITE (English) — Laurence M. Grummer-Strawn, Unit Head, Food and Nutrition Action in Health Systems, World Health Organization (WHO): “We continue to be very concerned about the practices of the formula industries, both the big multinational corporations as well as in many countries there are local producers of breastmilk substitutes that are trying to get mothers to get on to their products. They use a number of tricks, sometimes it’s not as blatant advertising as it once was, because they know that they can get caught.”**
15. Exterior medium shot, UN Geneva, Palais des Nations flag alley seen from the Places des Nations (stock).
16. External wide shot, “broken chair” sculpture, Place des Nations, with UN Geneva to rear (stock).

Story

Breastfeeding link to COVID-19 is negligible, says World Health Organization

The risk of COVID-19 infection from breastfeeding is negligible and has never been documented, the UN health agency said on Tuesday, while warning that not using mother's milk is linked to more than 820,000 child deaths a year, at a cost to the global economy of some \$300 billion.

"WHO has been very clear in its recommendations to say absolutely breastfeeding should continue," said Laurence Grummer-Strawn, head of the World Health Organization's Food and Nutrition Action in Health Systems unit. "We have never documented, anywhere around the world, any (COVID-19) transmission through breastmilk."

Exclusive breastfeeding for six months has many benefits for the infant and mother which far outweigh any risk from the new coronavirus pandemic, the WHO official said.

These advantages include the fact that breastmilk – including milk which is expressed - provides lifesaving antibodies that protect babies against many childhood illnesses.

This is only one of the reasons why new mothers should initiate "skin-to-skin contact" with their babies quickly, as "the risks of transmission of the COVID-19 virus from a COVID-positive mother to her baby seem to be extremely low", added Dr. Grummer-Strawn.

Having tested the breastmilk of "many" mothers around the world in a variety of studies, the WHO official explained that although a few samples had contained the virus, "when they followed up to see whether the virus was actually viable and could be infective, they did not find any actual infective virus".

Underscoring the WHO's longstanding support for using mother's milk over substitutes, Dr. Grummer-Strawn also warned that the pandemic had weakened essential breastfeeding support usually provided to families with newborns.

"The interruption of services has been tremendous around the world providing the kind of support mothers normally would get with breastfeeding," Dr. Grummer-Strawn told journalists. "Oftentimes, the health services that would provide maternal child health have been devoted to take care of the COVID response; sometimes families do not feel comfortable in going into the health services, because they're afraid that they might get COVID and so they don't come for the routine kinds of support."

According to the WHO, "about 820,000 children's lives are lost every year because of a lack of breastfeeding", Dr. Grummer-Strawn continued, in reference to deaths among under-fives. "Economically, there are losses of about \$300 billion a year in economic activity, lost because of a lack of breastfeeding," he added.

Numerous good things come from breastfeeding – for the child and their mother in developing and industrialized countries – WHO has long maintained.

In May, it insisted that "it is not safer to give infant formula milk", together with UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN).

The three organizations have united in their call to Governments to protect and promote women's access to skilled breastfeeding counselling, for World Breastfeeding Week 2020 (1-7 August).

“Breastfeeding provides benefits during the time of breastfeeding, and those that are most recognised are protection against diarrhoea, which is one of the top causes of mortality in low-income countries, protection against respiratory infections, against obesity – childhood obesity – as children get older, protection against leukaemia,” said Dr. Grummer-Strawn.

“In addition, breastfeeding protects the mother against breast cancer, ovarian cancer, Type 2 diabetes later on, so there are benefits for both the mother and the baby, and when we added these up it comes out to about 820,000 lives around the world, even in high-income countries.”

In addition to the pandemic, breastfeeding is under pressure from what WHO and UNICEF have described as harmful promotion of breast-milk substitutes.

Countries could do more to protect parents from misleading information, the UN agencies believe. “We continue to be very concerned about the practices of the formula industries, both the big multinational corporations as well as in many countries there are local producers of breastmilk substitutes that are trying to get mothers to get on to their products,” said Dr. Grummer-Strawn. “They use a number of tricks, sometimes it’s not as blatant advertising as it once was, because they know that they can get caught.”

According to WHO, of 194 countries analysed, 136 have legal measures related to the International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes and subsequent resolutions adopted by the World Health Assembly (known as the Code).

However, only 79 countries prohibit the promotion of breast-milk substitutes in health facilities, and only 51 have provisions that prohibit the distribution of free or low-cost supplies within the health care system, WHO said in a report published in May.

Only 19 countries have prohibited the sponsorship of scientific and health professional association meetings by manufacturers of breast-milk substitutes, which include infant formula, follow-up formula, and growing up milks marketed for use by infants and children up to 36-months old, the UN health agency study found.

WHO and UNICEF recommend that babies be fed nothing but breast milk for their first six months, after which they should continue breastfeeding – as well as eating other nutritious and safe foods – until at least two years old.

“The aggressive marketing of breast-milk substitutes, especially through health professionals that parents trust for nutrition and health advice, is a major barrier to improving newborn and child health worldwide,” said Dr Francesco Branca, Director of WHO’s Department of Nutrition and Food Safety. “Health care systems must act to boost parent’s confidence in breastfeeding without industry influence so that children don’t miss out on its lifesaving benefits.”