



Information for parents with infants and young children on COVID-19

Victorian Maternal and Child Health service update 22 April 2020

We understand that many parents may be feeling anxious or concerned about their children's health and wellbeing during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. As usual, parents should take care with babies because of their developing immune systems. But as far as we know about coronavirus (COVID-19), parents should be reassured that most young children and infants don't become seriously sick if they get infected.

For information about coronavirus (COVID-19) in Victoria, and ways to reduce the risk of infection and slow the spread of coronavirus, visit the Department of Health and Human Services website:
<https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/coronavirus>.

Maternal and Child Health care access is different

Parents may be understandably concerned about the risks of exposure to coronavirus (COVID-19) for their children and unsure whether to attend maternal and child health appointments, or group sessions.

To slow the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19) in the community, Maternal and Child Health (MCH) services will continue to provide services to families through alternative modes of delivery including telephone or electronic consultations and short (< 15 minutes) face to face consultations. Face to face group sessions will cease until further notice and will be replaced by telehealth sessions where available.

Please contact your local MCH service for local information on change of service delivery and remember the 24-hour **Maternal and Child Health Line** is always available on **13 22 29**.

Feeding your baby

Breastfeeding

Many parents may have questions as to whether they should continue to breastfeed, especially if they are unwell.

Breast milk contains many ingredients to help prevent and fight infection. It is recommended babies be fed only breast milk until they are six months old and continue breastfeeding with other foods into their second year of life.

The latest advice from the Australian Breastfeeding Association is to **keep breastfeeding, even if you are unwell**:

www.breastfeeding.asn.au/bfinfo/covid-19

If your baby is under six months and breastfeeding, offering them only breast milk protects them from a range of infections and reduces their need for medical treatment or hospitalisation.

If your baby is breastfeeding and using formula, consider replacing formula feeds with breastfeeds. Consult your MCH nurse, General Practitioner (GP) or Paediatrician for advice.

If you have stopped breastfeeding altogether, it is possible to start breastfeeding again if you want to. Contact the national Breastfeeding Helpline on 1800 686 268 for assistance.



COVID-19 and breastfeeding.



If you need help with breastfeeding, or want to restart, call 1800 686 268.



Visit breastfeeding.asn.au

The National Breastfeeding Helpline is supported by funding from the Australian Government.

If you have an older baby or toddler who is still breastfeeding, continued breastfeeding will help protect them from other illnesses until after the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has passed.

If you're using formula

It is easy to accidentally introduce germs into bottles while you're preparing infant formula.

Be extra careful about preparing bottles. This means always washing your hands thoroughly with soap, washing bottles thoroughly, sterilising them after every use, and making up formula with boiled water cooled to lukewarm or room temperature. See <https://raisingchildren.net.au/newborns/breastfeeding-bottle-feeding/bottle-feeding/formula-making-storing-transporting> for instructions on formula making.

Remember before feeding your baby, test the temperature of the formula by placing a few drops on the inside of your wrist, it should feel just warm.

Access to formula

If you are formula feeding, buy enough infant formula for three weeks but check the expiry dates.

In Australia, commercial infant formula or baby formula is the only safe alternative to breastmilk for infants for the first 12 months. Every infant formula you can buy in Australia meets strict Australian Standards.

- If you are having difficulty accessing your regular brand of infant formula, ensure that you read the preparation instructions carefully as dosages can vary between brands.
- The following milks should **not** be the main milk source for babies under 12 months of age:
 - Normal cow's milk
 - Skim evaporated, powdered or sweetened condensed milk
 - Dairy alternatives like soy, rice, almond or coconut milk.
- Homemade infant formula or diluted milks (of any of the above) are not a safe alternative to breastmilk or commercial infant formula for babies under 12 months.
- The use of 'follow-on formula' for infants aged 6–12 months is not considered necessary and no studies have shown advantages over using 'infant formula 0–6 months'.
- The use of formula for infants at risk of allergy or with cow's milk allergy needs to be on the advice of MCH Nurse, GP or Paediatrician.
- You can access formula through supermarkets, pharmacies, online stores or contacting formula companies directly.
- If you are unable to access formula, please contact your MCH service or the MCH Line on **13 22 29** for further advice.

What to do if you or a family member gets coronavirus?

Mothers are more at risk of becoming sick from coronavirus (COVID-19) than their babies. If you're breastfeeding and you're infected, it is **recommended you continue breastfeeding**. That's because the virus **has not been found in breastmilk**.

Wearing a mask when you are with your baby (including during feeding), washing hands before and after contact with your baby, and cleaning and disinfecting surfaces and any feeding equipment **will help** prevent your baby catching the virus from you.

If mothers are hospitalised or separated from your baby, you can express breastmilk for them.

Family members who need to self-isolate must stay at home and not attend public places, work, school, childcare or university.

Factsheets are available for anyone needing to self-isolate due to coronavirus (COVID-19):

- [Factsheet – confirmed case \(Word\)](#) or go to: <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/novel-coronavirus-confirmed-case-what-you-need-know>
- [Factsheet – close contact \(Word\)](#) or go to: <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/novel-coronavirus-close-contact-what-you-need-know>

What else can you do?

Keeping grandparents and anyone with pre-existing medical conditions safe

Many people will suffer only mild symptoms, however early indications are that the elderly and people with pre-existing medical conditions such as heart and lung disease are more at risk of experiencing severe symptoms. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can also be at greater risk as they experience higher rates of chronic disease.

If you or your partner get ill, someone else may need to help care for the baby or other children. Babies like to share their saliva with their caregivers, and they may be infected with the coronavirus (COVID-19) but have no symptoms. So, they may easily spread the infection to the people looking after them.

Many parents call on grandparents to help with childcare. Unfortunately, people over 65 years of age are the most likely to get seriously ill or die from the coronavirus.

If your standby carers are over 65 years, or 50 years and over for Aboriginal carers, or have a pre-existing medical condition, now is the time to think about making alternate childcare arrangements.

You may be able to access free childcare through the Australian [Government's Early Childhood Education and Care Relief Package](#).

Talk with grandparents or other carers about how they can reduce their risk of infection if they need to look after the baby.

Baby necessities

Some supply chains may be disrupted if many people are unwell and you may not be able to shop if you need to self-quarantine at home.

It is recommended you have two to three weeks' worth of supplies at home to prepare for this possibility. Consider stocking up on nappies for this length of time or keeping washable (cloth) nappies on hand.

Make sure vaccinations are up to date

Routine vaccination is the safest, most effective way to protect babies and children from illness.

Keep your child's vaccinations up to date to minimise the chance they'll need medical attention while the health system is dealing with coronavirus (COVID-19).

Hygiene for you and your baby

The best thing you can do is to practice good hygiene yourself and your family.

Good hygiene includes:

- Covering your coughs and sneezes with your elbow or a tissue.
- Disposing of tissues properly.
- Washing your hands often with soap and water, including before and after eating and after going to the toilet.
- Using alcohol-based hand sanitisers and putting them safely away from young children.
- Cleaning and disinfecting surfaces.
- If you are sick, avoiding contact with others and staying more than 1.5 metres away from people.
- Cleaning and sanitising frequently used objects such as mobiles, keys and wallets.

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Because babies put their hands in their mouths, frequently washing their face and hands and cleaning surfaces and objects they might touch will help protect them from any infection.

Surgical masks for you and your family

Surgical masks in the community are only helpful in preventing people who have coronavirus (COVID-19) from spreading it to others.

If you and your children are well, your family **do not** need to wear a surgical mask. There is little evidence that widespread use of surgical masks in healthy people prevents transmission in public.

Medical assistance

The Australian Government recently announced special provisions for parents of newborns to be bulk-billed when consulting a doctor or nurse via phone or videocall rather than in person. Please contact your GP for more information about these provisions.

What other supports are available for parents and carers?

It is recommended that parents/carers contact their local MCH service for details of service provision in their local areas. Further support and advice for parents/carers can be received from the sources below.

- [Maternal and Child Health Line 13 22 29](#) a free and confidential service available to parents and families with children from birth to commencing school age. The Maternal and Child Health Line is staffed by qualified Maternal and Child Health nurses. Parents can ring the MCH Line 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to get information, support and guidance on lots of issues like child health, nutrition, breastfeeding, maternal and family health and parenting. **The MCH Line continues to provide 24 hour/7 day week service and is currently fully staffed.**
- Raising Children Network <https://raisingchildren.net.au/> provides parenting videos, articles and apps backed by Australian experts and information for parents and carers on Coronavirus <https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/coronavirus-covid-19-guide>
- [Nurse on Call 1300 606 024](#) <<https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/primary-and-community-health/primary-care/nurse-on-call>>: this telephone service provides access to expert health advice from a registered nurse, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.
- [Parentline 13 22 89](#) < <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/parents/services-for-parents/Pages/parentline.aspx>>: a free and confidential telephone counselling service available to Victorian parents and carers of children aged from birth to 18-years-old. Parentline is staffed by social workers and psychologists and is available from 8am to midnight, 7 days a week. The service offers information on lots of parenting issues and can help parents to develop strategies for positive parenting and personal coping.
- [1800 mum2mum 1800 686 268](#) < <https://www.breastfeeding.asn.au/breastfeeding-helpline>>: this is the Australian Breastfeeding Foundation's national breastfeeding helpline.
- [Care Ring 13 61 69](#) < <https://www.unitingkildonan.org.au/programs-and-services/financial-support/caring/>>: a Victorian service staffed by volunteers trained to respond to concerns and emergencies, including domestic violence, family matters, child abuse, depression and anxiety, loneliness, unemployment, grief, homelessness, money worries, drug and alcohol problems, and suicide.
- [Council of Single Mothers and their Children Support Line: \(03\) 9654 0622 or outside Melbourne 1300 552 511](#) <<https://www.csmc.org.au/?q=contact>>: a support service staffed by professional single mothers with lived experience who can provide advice and info on Government benefits, dealing with Centrelink, Family Court and Child Support Agency, parenting solo, housing, family violence, managing money, and work and study. Interpreting services available for women of non-English-speaking background.

- [Lifeline 13 11 14](https://www.lifeline.org.au/) <<https://www.lifeline.org.au/>>: a 24-hour confidential crisis support service responding to a range of concerns including anxiety, depression, abuse, suicidal thoughts and stress.
- [Women's Information & Referral Exchange \(WIRE\) 1300 134 130](https://www.wire.org.au/contact/) or go to the WIRE website to contact WIRE via LiveChat <<https://www.wire.org.au/contact/>>: a free and confidential telephone service provided for women by women offering information and referral on any issue including violence, sexual assault, relationships, the law, finance, health, family matters, drugs and alcohol, sexual harassment, employment and sexuality. Interpreting assistance is available for women of non-English-speaking background.
- [PANDA Helpline 1300 726 306](https://www.panda.org.au/info-support/pandas-national-perinatal-anxiety-depression-helpline) < <https://www.panda.org.au/info-support/pandas-national-perinatal-anxiety-depression-helpline>>: PANDA's National Perinatal Anxiety & Depression Helpline is Australia's only free, national helpline service for women, men and their families affected by perinatal anxiety and depression. The Helpline provides a safe and confidential space for any new or expecting parent struggling with the challenges of becoming a new parent.