

Position Statement: Infant Feeding in an Emergency for Babies Aged 0–12 Months¹

The position statement aligns New Zealand’s emergency preparedness and response with international obligations and best practice evidence for feeding babies in an emergency.

Breastfeeding provides the best possible nutrition for babies and is the safest way to feed babies in an emergency, especially if clean water and electricity is not available.

Where babies are not fed breast milk, a properly prepared, commercial infant formula is the only safe alternative.

Cows’ milk should not be given as a drink to babies less than 12 months of age.

Parents and caregivers are encouraged to stock emergency supplies for themselves and their baby to last at least 3 days or more.

Breastfeeding in an emergency

Health practitioners/emergency responders working with families and their babies during an emergency will:

- encourage women who are breastfeeding to continue as normal
- recognise that relactation is an option for women who have recently stopped breastfeeding², providing a woman can get access to the assistance of a health professional
- not distribute infant formula products to breastfeeding mothers
- be aware that babies should be fed only breast milk until around six months of age
- be aware that breastfeeding should continue once complementary foods have been introduced until at least one year of age, or beyond.

Formula feeding in an emergency

Health practitioners/emergency responders working with families and their babies during an emergency will:

- where possible, support families to purchase, safely prepare, and use, their own supplies of infant formula
- only distribute infant formula to people who need it
- distribute only infant formula, feeding equipment and other essential feeding supplies that have been provided on behalf of the relevant Civil Defence Controller³ and in accordance with the Controller’s assessment of the specific emergency situation
- ensure that follow-on formula and toddler milks are not provided to feed babies under the age of six months⁴.

¹ More comprehensive information on preparing for an emergency and feeding your baby in an emergency is available in Consumer Resource: Feeding Your Baby during an Emergency (for babies aged 0–12 months) which is available on the Ministry of Health website: www.health.govt.nz/your-health/healthy-living/emergency-management/feeding-your-baby-during-emergency

² As a general guide, ‘recently’ means women who have stopped breastfeeding within the last three weeks or so.

³ Means the person who is the National Controller, in accordance with section 10 of the Civil Defence Emergency Management Act 2002, or a Group Controller appointed under section 26 of that Act.

⁴ The Ministry of Health does not recommend the use of follow-on formula and toddler milks. After 12 months of age, babies can be fed whole (dark blue) cows’ milk as a drink.

Supply of infant formula in an emergency

Agencies, health practitioners and emergency responders involved in the emergency response will:

- decline, and not seek, donations of infant formula, including donations of follow-on formula and toddler milks and instead, use only infant formula that has been sourced and distributed on behalf of the relevant Civil Defence Controller and in accordance with the Controller's assessment of the specific emergency situation
- follow the Civil Defence donated goods management procedures and suggest that donations of money are made to the emergency relief effort instead of goods
- not distribute unsolicited donations of infant formula, including follow-on formula and toddler milks, that are received and instead, arrange return or removal of unsolicited donations in conjunction with the designated district health board emergency response point-of-contact.

Key contacts

Parents and caregivers needing advice on breastfeeding or formula feeding can contact:

- their lead maternity carer, well-child provider, lactation consultant or registered dietitian.
- Plunketline (0800 933 922) or Healthline (0800 611 116)
- emergency health services available by contacting the Civil Defence staff operating in their area or by going to a Civil Defence Centre.

Parents and caregivers needing infant formula, feeding equipment and clean water and who cannot purchase these items in the usual way should contact the Civil Defence staff operating in their area or go to their local Civil Defence Centre.

If a baby's life is in danger, or has special dietary/nutritional needs for medical reasons, the nearest hospital/health service should be contacted.

Civil Defence Emergency Management staff seeking advice on infant feeding in an emergency should contact their local district health board emergency response point-of-contact in the first instance.