

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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FOR HAITI ORPHANS WET NURSING CAN SAVE LIVES

A new statement issued jointly by UNICEF, the World Health Organization, and Pan American Health Organization, reminds relief workers, healthcare professionals, and the public that in an emergency such as the Haiti earthquake, the key to survival of all infants, including orphans, is breastfeeding. When a child is motherless or separated from his or her mother, wet nursing, that is, direct breastfeeding from another lactating mother, is the safest feeding option. Since the breastfeeding rate in Haiti is very high, there is a good likelihood of being able to find wet nurses for large numbers of motherless infants.

UNICEF, WHO and PAHO have recommended wet nursing, also called “cross nursing” or “shared breastfeeding,” for infants without mothers to “ensure their survival in an emergency situation.”

<http://onerresponse.info/Disasters/Haiti/Nutrition/publicdocuments/Forms/DispForm.aspx?ID=78>

There are a very small number of pathogens that may be transmitted via breastfeeding, including HIV. However, the risk of transmission of HIV via breastfeeding is low. The

alternative to wet nursing for motherless infants is use of infant formula. The situation in Haiti is such that formula feeding presents a greater risk than the possibility of HIV infection via wet nursing.

Formula feeding in an emergency is extremely difficult and dangerous. **Even when properly prepared**, infant formula actively and passively harms the immune system of young babies, placing them at risk of life-threatening diarrhea and respiratory illness. [The Emergency Nutrition Network provides information on how formula can cause deaths due to diarrhea in an emergency at: <http://www.enonline.net/resources/101>.]

Formula feeding also requires extensive investment from the supporting aid agency. This includes a constant supply of infant formula; a stable supply of clean water; a stove and fuel to boil water; a pot, kettle, and feeding cups. Bottles and teats (artificial nipples) should never be used in emergency conditions because they are too difficult to adequately clean. Caregivers also need a clean storage environment, education on minimizing the risks of formula feeding, and medical supervision. This support should be provided not just in the immediate emergency, but until the infant is 12 months old,

According to the International Lactation Consultant Association (ILCA), wet nursing is not new, and has been practiced since the beginning of time not just in emergencies, but for convenience of mothers. The practice was made more visible with reports of actress Salma Hayek, who breastfed a suffering child in Sierra Leone last year, and Chinese

police officer Jiang Xiaojuan, who was reported to have breastfed five additional infants besides her own after the May 2008 earthquake in China.

ILCA provides additional recommendations on supporting breastfeeding mothers consistent with directives from international relief organizations, including:

- *Feed the mother* so she can, in turn, feed her infant.
- Provide a safe environment for breastfeeding if needed, including providing a private area or a way to breastfeed discreetly, if the mother desires it.
- Assist mothers who are separated from their infants with regular milk removal to avoid engorgement and maintain their milk production for when they are reunited with their baby.
- Assist mothers with re-establishing their milk production if they have already weaned their baby.

ILCA also strongly encourages the general public to avoid the temptation to donate infant formula to Haiti and, instead, to donate funds to relief organizations for use in meeting highest priority needs. Aid agencies supporting infants in Haiti that cannot be breastfed have procured the supplies that they need. Donations of infant formula only complicate the secure and sanitary provision of aid by workers on the ground. The organizations providing aid to breastfed and formula-fed infants in Haiti include: UNICEF, Save the Children, Action Against Hunger and World Vision.

ILCA has several free downloadable resources for families, health care providers, and relief workers at: www.ilca.org in English, Spanish, and French. The website also has a user-friendly “Find a Lactation Consultant Directory” of available International Board Certified Lactation Consultants (IBCLCs) worldwide who can assist new mothers or relief workers with lactation.

To learn more about breastfeeding in emergency situations, visit the ILCA website at www.ilca.org, or contact the ILCA Office at info@ilca.org, or (919) 861-5577.

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