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27 Aug 2009 03:50:00 AM IST

Breastfeeding shields infants from H1N1

CHENNAI: Breastfeeding can prevent swine flu in babies and mothers who are affected by swine flu should not discontinue it as breast milk helps infants get anti-bodies that protect them from infection.

"The mothers who are affected by swine flu should continue breastfeeding while observing good hygiene, washing hands regularly and using a face mask, says Dr Arun Gupta, Regional Coordinator of The International Baby Food Action Network, Asia (IBFAN -Asia).

Even the World Health Organization feels breastfeeding lowers the risk of respiratory disease, says Dr Gupta. "Studies on other influenza infections show that breastfeeding is most likely protective for babies - it passes on helpful maternal immunities and lowers the risk of respiratory disease. Breastfeeding provides the best overall nutrition for babies and increases their defense factors to fight illness," says WHO.

Apart from the continued breastfeeding mothers should use a mask if a caretaker has flu-like or other respiratory symptoms, and avoid crowds are some other recommended actions to reduce risk of infant exposure, says Dr Gupta.

The British department of health also recommends that "Women who are breastfeeding should continue while receiving antiviral treatment or prophylaxis as they are not contraindicated in breastfeeding."

Even the US Centre for Disease Control (CDC) recommends continued breastfeeding by the mother if she becomes sick with respiratory symptoms and have either suspected or a proven H1N1 infection. This is postulated that infants get antibodies in breast milk that protects them from the infection.

"This is a well known fact that breast milk contains a variety of protective agents including live cells, antibodies and anti inflammatory factors which help strengthening of immunity of an infant. At the same time, infant formula does not provide this protection. Therefore breastfeeding can be a vital tool in preventing the disease," says Prof MMA Faridi, Head, Department of Pediatrics, Delhi's University College of Medical Sciences and GTB hospital.

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