

## **Breastfed babies: Ready for Anything!**

By Stephanie Sosnowski

While many people may have heard that breastfeeding is best for babies, they may not truly understand how vital the decision to breastfeed may be in an emergency situation.

Breastmilk is the safest and most convenient food in an emergency, according to United States Breastfeeding Committee Chairperson Joan Younger Meek, MD, MS, RD, IBCLC, whose organization proudly joined others from more than 120 countries to celebrate World Breastfeeding Week in August. This year's focus drew attention to the vital role that breastfeeding plays during emergencies worldwide and stressed the need for active protection and support of breastfeeding during and before emergencies.

Here in the Hudson Valley, we are fortunate to have not experienced a natural disaster on the scale of Hurricane Katrina, however, all new mothers need to know that if possible, the best way to feed their babies is with their own breastmilk. Sadly, Hurricane Katrina displaced nearly 1 million people from their homes. Mothers who were formula feeding found that there was not enough formula or clean water supplies to sustain their infant's nutritional needs. However, mothers that were breastfeeding were able to supply complete nourishment to their babies. One new mother was stranded on the roof of her home for 5 days with her formula-fed 2 week old newborn -- the baby was hospitalized upon rescue, but later died.

Breastfeeding offers unsurpassed protection against diseases, too. The Centers for Disease Control has issued recommendations that if a breastfeeding mother contracts the H1N1 virus, she should continue to breastfeed her baby, and that mother and baby are to be kept together while in the hospital. That is not the case for formula-fed newborns – the recommendation is to separate mother and baby to prevent transmission of the virus to the baby. Breastfeeding mothers that are exposed to the H1N1 virus are able to pass antibodies directly to their newborns to help their babies ward off the infection. The CDC also recommends vaccinating pregnant women against the flu, as well.

Although most (76 %) new mothers leave New York hospitals with their newborns breastfeeding, women fight an uphill battle to continue breastfeeding in a society where breastfeeding is not fully acknowledged as the norm and as the best method of infant feeding. Going back to work or school as a breastfeeding mother can be difficult, and often leads to the baby weaning from breastfeeding due to lack of support from friends, family and employers.

Support for breastfeeding is increasing, though. The New York State Department of Health (NYSDOH) recognizes the importance of new mothers choosing to breastfeed, and has recently issued a "Call to Action" to promote breastfeeding in New York State. State Health Commissioner Richard F. Daines, M.D. has called on all healthcare providers to join NYSDOH and other stakeholders in efforts to "increase awareness, reduce barriers, and improve knowledge and skills in promoting and supporting exclusive breastfeeding."

New families should be aware of the New York State Department of Labor Nursing Mothers in the Workplace Act that protects mothers' right to express (pump) breastmilk at their worksite. Businesses can contact Maternal-Infant Services Network (MISN) to get more information on how they can accommodate nursing mothers at their worksites.

MISN can help expectant families make informed decisions about breastfeeding. MISN offers free childbirth and parenting preparation classes in Orange, Sullivan and Ulster Counties and breastfeeding education is included in each series. Call 1-800-453-4666 for free breastfeeding information, or visit [www.misn-ny.org](http://www.misn-ny.org).

**Stephanie Sosnowski is the Deputy Director of Maternal-Infant Services Network (MISN) of Orange, Sullivan and Ulster Counties, a not-for-profit organization that coordinates health and human services for pregnant women and children.**