

## **PREGNANCY AND BREASTFEEDING DURING THE CORONAVIRUS COVID19 PANDEMIC**

**A fact sheet for maternal and newborn care providers in rural areas of Sub-Saharan Africa and for mothers literate enough to read this text.**

**What is a CORONA VIRUS ?** Corona viruses are viruses that circulate among animals but sometimes they change and use human beings as hosts. They have spikes all around, like a crown, and that is how they latch on to all surfaces easily, like spiky thorns in dry bushland. Before the present one, named COVID19, there were SARS and MERS, also corona viruses that began to infect human beings. They also caused respiratory infections including pneumonia.

Bats are host to a wide range of corona viruses. This is how these viruses can mix and change, scientists think. But not only bats are hosts. Other animals can also be hosts, for instance, the dromedary (camel). These animals act as an intermediate host and animal reservoir, and the virus can “jump” to humans who come in touch with these animals, dead or alive, or with their secretions and excrements.

Viruses are smaller than germs and they are more dangerous, because they can stay “asleep” for days or weeks until a new host comes along. Antibiotics are of no use against viruses. But since the virus can bring germs along, antibiotics are sometimes prescribed to prevent a microbial infection on top of the virus infection.

### **Protecting pregnant women from contracting the coronavirus COVID19**

Measures that apply to high risk groups such as the elderly or adults with a chronic illness or apply to pregnant women. This virus can cause pneumonia and pregnant women are more susceptible to respiratory problems. It is recommended that pregnant women should self-isolate for 12 weeks. They should stay home, work from home and minimize their contact with people. Working in the field is OK, if those who go together keep a good distance of 1,5 m while walking and working.

Women should not miss their antenatal care appointments and should be in touch with their designated midwife team regarding the best course of action. **Some visits may be deferred after appropriate telephone consultations e.g. through *JamboMama!*, especially if there is no concern about fetal movements and general maternal wellbeing.**

At this point in time, women are still advised to keep their ANC appointments, stick to their birthing plans and not to suddenly make drastic changes like reverting to home births. **Last minute changes to birth plans is often where things go wrong.** Pregnant women should not avoid their prenatal checkups.

The antenatal, obstetric and postnatal care service providers will decide **which prenatal care visits can be safely combined and what can be done through e-Health communication tools such as *JamboMama!***.

No evidence exists yet that the risks are greater for pregnant women than for others. But pregnant women are at risk of the disease like everyone else, and we don't know yet what it does to the baby. It is also very dangerous if she falls ill with Corona as it can make her very weak, and for the delivery she needs to be fit and healthy. She needs strong lungs ! So we need to do all we can to protect pregnant women and their babies.

But how to respect the rules of keeping distance from others and not touching during ANC visits? It is not possible. Antenatal care especially in the last trimester is very *hands on*. It involves listening to the heart tones of the baby, determining the position of the baby, measuring the height of the mom's belly and so on. None of this can be done via a phone call.

There are things that can be done to make hospital visits safer, though. Staff **can make sure that waiting rooms aren't crowded**, spacing the seating by indicating on the benches the places where someone can sit. They can have someone **clean the waiting area** constantly, and make sure that **women who are well and those who are ill are separated**. They can install safe handwashing facilities for the mothers and for the care providing staff, and demonstrate correct use. Staff should wear masks and gloves, and demand them if they are not available. Pregnant women should be shown how to cover their mouth and nose when going out and sharing public space. Either with a mask, or with a cotton cloth that is regularly washed.

Regulating attendance is also necessary. With the *JamboMama!* app you could have half the women come for an ANC control in person while the other half is checked through the *JamboMama!* app. That avoids overcrowding in the waiting areas. At the next ANC the woman who attended in person will have a distance check-up through the *JamboMama!* app and those who had the smartphone check-up the first time round will come to the clinic for a physical exam. Of course, this is general, the condition of an expectant mother may mean she has to be seen more often than the average.

### **What are the risks of coronavirus to newborns?**

Fortunately, the virus that causes COVID-19 has not yet been found in breastmilk. If a mother is feeding a baby and has no symptoms, **hand hygiene is key**. If a mother has symptoms best would be to express the breast milk into a clean cup (kept in boiling water for 5 minutes) and get someone else to feed the baby with a clean spoon if she is too sick herself. This should be decided with her health provider.



Expressing milk and then spoonfeeding it to the baby in a safe manner may be too complicated in a rural setting. Extra hand and upper body hygiene may be the safer solution for breastfeeding in rural underserved areas with lowly educated and poor populations. It is better for a mother to continue nursing if she has only mild symptoms because the baby needs the antibodies in the milk, which will give it the best possible chances against the virus making the baby ill.

Individual guidance, however, may depend on how ill the mother is with the coronavirus. A discussion about the risks and benefits of breastfeeding should take place between the mother and her family and the maternity team.

So far, children account for the [smallest share](#) of infections identified. But of the few children who do develop serious cases, **those under the age of 5 are the most at risk while infants under 12 months in most danger**, it was found for a study in China.

The [CDC advises](#) a mother who is symptomatic to [take all possible precautions](#) before handling their baby, including **washing their hands before touching the baby and wearing a face mask while breastfeeding**. If a mother chooses to feed her baby with expressed milk, the RCOG recommends that she strictly follows [sterilization guidelines](#). But this is only necessary if the mother has symptoms of the virus, not if she feels well.

---

**General rules for everyone** These are even more important for the vulnerable : babies, expectant and nursing mothers, the elderly and adults with a chronic disease. Healthy adults should also respect them to protect the vulnerable.

- Stay at least a full metre apart from one another. Also in the house if possible at all, also in the yard, also with your visiting relatives and neighbours, who should stop visiting you unless necessary. Never more than one visitor at a time, and preferably stay outside where you can keep a distance.

- Try not to speak up and to not direct your voice in the direction of the other person's face to avoid droplets to pass from to another.

- Wash your hands regularly with soaps and clean water. Rub well, also between the fingers and around the thumb. Try not to touch your face, eyes, nose and ears.

- Washing your hands with soap and water is better than with disinfectant. But when there is no water and no soap, a disinfectant has to be used.

- Wash your hands after using the toilet and before eating, but ALSO every time you have been outside and you come back home, or when you have touched objects that were brought into the home or garden from outside less than a full day ago.

- Every time you have touched things outside the home or touched other persons.



- Disinfect doorknobs, light switches, telephones, smartphones, remote controls, working tools, household items and **all other things different people touch regularly**. This can be done with a clean rag that you wet with water with some bleach in it (look at the instructions on the bottle for the right dose). Throw the rag away after having cleaned some ten « touch points », or wash the rag with hot soapy water and put it out to dry in the sun.

- Meals. If you can't give each member of the family his or her own bowl or plate to eat from, give the pregnant mother, the elderly and the young children their own bowl. Have each person use his or her own spoon for eating. If non-members of the household join the meal, put the food in a different bowl for them. Do not accept more than one or two outsiders ( this includes close relatives not living in your household) at a time and be strict with their handwashing and eating utensil hygiene. Use some liquid soap for the washing up and use a brush to scrub, it breaks the « skin » of the virus. Rinse with warm water if possible and dry in the sun.

- Objects (things you bought or received from outside which have been touched by other people) should be left a couple of hours in a cool place outside the home. After twelve hours, most surfaces won't have the virus anymore. So if you buy a big bag of rice and you can store it and noone touches it for at least twelve hours it should be ok. If you need to use it immediately, the person who opens the bag and scoops out the rice has to wash her hands before starting to cook. If you must bring it in immediately, the item is cleaned with a cloth with a mix of water with a bit of bleach or alcohol before you touch it.

These rules may change, they may become stricter or more precise, and they may become lighter, as the global community learns more and more about the virus, sharing practical experience and reserach results.

In a nutshell : Reduce physical contact, stay apart, wash your hands regularly ; keep healthy : eat varied food not too salty, sugary and fatty, eat fruits and vegetables, remain active and get enough sleep. These are the best tools to stay healthy and to contract only a mild form of the disease if you get contaminated.

And in the spirit of **JamboMama!** the husband, the CHW and the healthcare professional should enforce respect for the expectant and nursing mom's need for others to stick to social distancing and the wash your hands and don't touch rules.

She may be shy to ask it, but she and her unborn or newborn baby need it !



©Laetitia van Haren, SAHFA/JamboMama! March 2020, Revised April 2020  
Source used for first part of the text : Time.com

Please send your suggestions (tips, leads and stories) to [contact@sahfa.org](mailto:contact@sahfa.org)