

A photograph of a smiling baby with blonde hair and blue eyes, sitting in a swimming pool. A woman, presumably the mother, is partially visible on the left, looking down at the baby. The water is clear blue, and the background is a bright blue sky. The image is overlaid with a dark blue semi-transparent box containing the title text.

BREASTFEEDING AT AQUATIC VENUES

Public Health and Safety Considerations

Concerns continue to be expressed regarding mothers breastfeeding nursing infants at aquatic venues. Some venues interpret breast milk as falling under “No Food or Drink” rules.

However, the concern that breast milk poses a contamination hazard is unfounded. Aquatic venues should allow nursing mothers to breastfeed even while in the pool.

To understand the basis of this statement, several key points should be considered:

- **Breast milk leakage is minimal.** Nursing mothers may leak breast milk. The amount varies and typically decreases over time. This leakage is usually unnoticed while the mother is using the aquatic venue, whether for recreation or physical activity. It may occur even if the mother is not actively nursing.
- **Infants nurse above the waterline.** Infants will naturally nurse while held above the surface, reducing the chance of pool water contacting breast milk.
- **Spit-up volume is low.** While an infant may spit up during or after feeding, the volume is typically 1–2 mouthfuls. According to the Cleveland Clinic¹, a 6-month-old consumes 3–4 ounces per feeding. For comparison, 1 US fluid ounce equals about 6 teaspoons.
- **Breast milk is not equivalent to food or drink.** Unlike solid food or beverages, breast milk differs in composition, digestion, and potential for contamination. It's inappropriate to equate a baby's spit-up with the kind of vomiting that results from pool water ingestion in older children or adults.

But breast milk carries pathogens, right?

Technically, yes. Human breast milk can carry HIV, hepatitis B and C, West Nile Virus, and cytomegalovirus (CMV)². Some studies have detected MRSA, though transmission occurs through skin-to-mouth contact rather than through the milk itself.

An NIH study³ concluded: “The primary perceived risk associated with breastfeeding is maternal virus transmission, the greatest concern being HIV. However, when the mother is provided with antiretroviral therapy and exclusive breastfeeding is practiced, the transmission rate is very low.”

Is spit-up the same as vomiting?

No. Vomiting involves forceful expulsion of stomach contents, while spit-up is a gentler release of small amounts of milk. The mechanisms are distinctly different.

What does the CDC say about breastfeeding in pools?

According to the CDC⁴: “No scientific study has examined the health and safety of breastfeeding babies in water. It is unlikely that breastfeeding in the water presents any more risks for babies and children than the risks of regular pool or splash pad use.”

What does OSHA say about breastfeeding in the workplace?

In an official interpretation⁵ of OSHA regulation 29 CFR 1910.1030 (Occupational Exposure to Bloodborne Pathogens), OSHA states: “Breast milk is not included in the standard’s definition of ‘other potentially infectious materials.’ Therefore, contact with breast milk does not constitute occupational exposure.”

What about the risk to the infant from ingesting pool water?

In an aquatic venue following the MAHC, the risk is minimal. These facilities follow operational standards designed to protect public health. Fecal-related illnesses are the primary concern, but MAHC-compliant pools proactively mitigate this risk. Additionally, infants nurse above the waterline, limiting exposure to water present on the mother's body.

What does the data show?

There are no identified or published cases of disease transmission, including HIV, via breast milk leaking or spilling into a pool. Likewise, there are no documented cases of infants becoming ill after breastfeeding while the mother was wet from pool water.

I follow the MAHC and keep safe and healthy water.

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How can I support nursing mothers?

Firstly, acknowledging that breastfeeding is a natural and healthy process for the nursing infant is an important step. A second significant acknowledgement is that many states protect the mother's right to breastfeed in public and do not classify breastfeeding as indecent exposure⁶.

Steps aquatic management can take to support nursing mothers include:

- Posting signage welcoming nursing mothers and supporting breastfeeding
- Develop inclusive policies and training staff on how to support nursing mothers through these policies
- Develop policies that protect nursing mothers from ridicule or harmful statements made by bathers, guests, and the general public
- Training staff on applicable local, county, state, federal, tribal, and territorial laws regarding breastfeeding
- Create optional private spaces where mothers may nurse in comfort

To learn more about breastfeeding, please visit

<https://womenshealth.gov/breastfeeding/learning-breastfeed/finding-breastfeeding-support-and-information>.

References

¹<https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/articles/9693-feeding-your-baby-the-first-year>

²<https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/infant-and-toddler-health/in-depth/healthy-baby/art-20044329>

³<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7152307/>

⁴<https://www.cdc.gov/breastfeeding/php/faq/faq.html>

⁵<https://www.osha.gov/laws-regs/standardinterpretations/1992-12-14>

⁶<https://www.ncsl.org/health/breastfeeding-state-laws>