Even With a Suppressed Viral Load, Mothers With HIV Should Not Breast-feed

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HIV-positive mothers should avoid breast-feeding, regardless of their viral load or whether they are on antiretrovirals, MedPage today reports. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), which has taken a strong stance advocating breast-feeding among HIV-negative women, issued the policy statement in the February issue of Pediatrics. The position is in opposition to the World Health Organization's recommendation for resource-poor countries, where mothers don't have easy access to formula and where malnutrition is a primary concern.

Even if mothers have a suppressed viral load, there is still a risk, albeit a low one, of transmission to their child if they breast-feed, according to the AAP release. So long as mothers have access to clean water and affordable infant formula, the benefits of breast-feeding are outweighed by the risk of transmitting the virus, the AAP argues.

There is a higher risk of transmission if mothers are acutely (very recently) infected, or if they have mastitis or other breast abnormalities. There is also greater risk if they have a high viral load or a low CD4 count. If mothers suspect they may be HIV positive, they should not breast-feed until their HIV status has been established. To maintain their milk supply in the meantime, they can pump and then discard the milk.

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