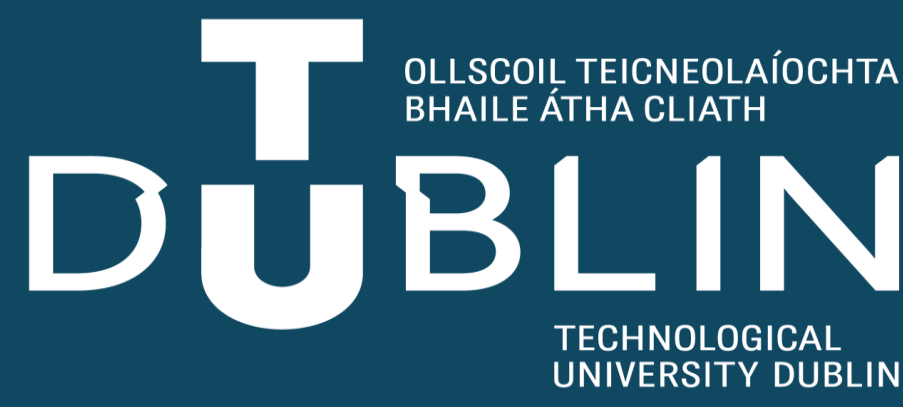


Healthcare Professionals' Perspectives on Infant and Young Child Feeding During Emergencies in Ireland



Pamela Merrigan^{1,2}, Aileen Kennedy¹, Elizabeth J. O'Sullivan¹



Trinity College Dublin
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
The University of Dublin

¹School of Biological, Health and Sports Sciences, Technological University Dublin,

²School of Medicine, Trinity College Dublin, The University of Dublin

1. INTRODUCTION

- Infant and Young Child Feeding in Emergencies (IYCF-E) protects infant health by ensuring safe access to adequate nutrition during crises.^{1,2,3}
- Ireland has low breastfeeding rates and high reliance on commercial milk formula.⁴
- Emergencies can disrupt access to formula, electricity, safe water for formula preparation, and healthcare supports.²
- Ireland currently has no national IYCF-E plan.¹



AIM

To explore healthcare professionals' (HCPs) knowledge and perceptions of infant and young child feeding during emergencies in Ireland.

2. METHODS

STUDY DESIGN
Qualitative study

PARTICIPANTS

15 HCPs working in community, hospital and management roles across the Republic of Ireland.

DATA COLLECTION

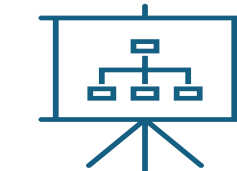
Semi-structured interviews conducted between December 2022 and October 2023.

DATA ANALYSIS

Braun and Clarke's six-step reflexive thematic analysis using NVivo software.



Ethical approval granted by the TU Dublin Research Ethics Committee (REIC-21-130)



3. RESULTS – THREE KEY THEMES WERE GENERATED



THEME 1 Fragmented and inconsistent infant feeding support

- Inconsistent training and confidence across HCPs.
- Poor communication between hospitals, public health nurses, GPs, and other services.
- Policies and guidelines exist but are not embedded in everyday practice.

“There is no formal training for medical staff...in terms of infant feeding.”

(Neonatologist 1)

“There’s very little communication generally between hospitals and public health nurses...it’s very disjointed, and in most places work is in little silos.”

(Paediatric Dietitian)



THEME 2 Reliance on formula heightens emergency risks

- Heavy reliance on formula creates vulnerability if supply chains, safe water or electricity are disrupted.
- Very limited alternatives such as donor milk are available and awareness of them among HCPs is low.
- Vulnerable families face additional barriers (language, homelessness, financial constraints).

“Ireland...might have a few weeks where it couldn’t replace [Formula] if there was a sudden, urgent demand here.”

(Public Health Nurse)

“We have the lowest rates of breastfeeding, highest rates of formula feeding...so many small babies depend on formula.”

(General Practitioner)



THEME 3 Need for coordinated national leadership and planning

- No clear leadership or responsibility for IYCF-E.
- COVID-19 exposed weaknesses but also highlighted opportunities for improvement.
- HCPs support a national IYCF-E plan with clear components and multi-agency collaboration.

“I don’t think it can be any one sole person, I think it needs to be a combination of expertise.”

(Social Inclusion Support Worker)

“...during COVID...support for feeding...fell off the radar...”

(Speech and Language Therapist)

4. CONCLUSION

Infant feeding support in Ireland is inconsistent and fragmented.

Heavy reliance on commercial milk formula increases risks during emergencies.

Ireland lacks clear leadership and a coordinated national plan for IYCF-E.

Strengthening everyday infant feeding support, and preparing for emergencies are essential to protect infant health in Ireland.



5. IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND POLICY



Provide consistent education and training for HCPs on breastfeeding, safe formula preparation and IYCF-E.



Improve communication and continuity across maternity services, public health, GPs and community supports.



Develop and imbed a national IYCF-E policy within emergency preparedness planning.



Ensure secure formula supplies, protect breastfeeding support, and increase awareness of donor milk.



6. REFERENCES

- Kennedy A, O'Sullivan L, Patton C. Infant and young child feeding in emergencies on the island of Ireland: a guidance document for creating an all-island preparedness plan [Internet]. Dublin (Ireland): The IYCF-E Ireland Working Group; 2025 Mar [cited 2025 Oct 12]. Available from: <https://www.tu-dublin.ie/media/website/explainschools/biological-and-health-sciences/IYCF-E.pdf>
- IFE Core Group. Operational Guidance on Infant and Young Child Feeding in Emergencies (OG-IFE) v3 [Internet]. Oxford (UK): Emergency Nutrition Network; 2024 Nov [cited 2025 Oct 12]. Available from: https://www.enonline.net/sites/default/files/2024-11/ope-guidance-on-ife_v3_english.pdf
- World Health Organization. Infant and young child feeding [Internet]. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2023 [updated 2023; cited 2025 Oct 12]. Available from: <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/infant-and-young-child-feeding>
- Health Service Executive (HSE). Breastfeeding Action Plan Progress Report 2016–2023 [Internet]. Dublin (Ireland): Health Service Executive; 2024 Sep 25 [cited 2025 Oct 12]. Available from: <https://www.hse.ie/eng/about/who/healthwellbeing/our-priority-programmes/child-health-and-wellbeing/breastfeeding-healthy-childhood-programme/research-and-reports-breastfeeding/hse-breastfeeding-action-plan-implementation-progress-report.pdf>