

Maternal & Child Health: Breastfeeding

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In the United States, many new mothers want, and try, to breastfeed, but it is not always enough to make it possible. Rates of breastfeeding vary across the country because of a variety of barriers mothers face when starting and continuing to breastfeed. In 2011, 'The Surgeon General's Call to Action to Support Breastfeeding' was published, seeking to make it possible for every mother who wishes to breastfeed to be able to do so.

Here are some of the statistics taken from the Surgeon General's Report (1):

What are the health benefits of breastfeeding? [Why is this issue important?]

- Breastfeeding protects babies from infections and illnesses that include diarrhea, ear infections and pneumonia.
- Breastfed babies are less likely to develop asthma.
- Children who are breastfed for six months are less likely to become obese.
- Breastfeeding also reduces the risk of sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS).
- Mothers who breastfeed have a decreased risk of breast and ovarian cancers.

What are the economic benefits of breastfeeding? [What's the impact beyond health?]

- Families who follow optimal breastfeeding practices can save between \$1,200–\$1,500 in expenditures on infant formula in the first year alone.
- A study published in the journal *Pediatrics* estimated that if 90% of U.S. families followed guidelines to breastfeed exclusively for six months, the U.S. would annually save \$13 billion from reduced medical and other costs.
- For both employers and employees, better infant health means fewer health insurance claims, less employee time off to care for sick children, and higher productivity.
- Mutual of Omaha found that health care costs for newborns are three times lower for babies whose mothers participate in the company's employee maternity and lactation program.

What obstacles do mothers encounter when they attempt to breastfeed? [Where can we facilitate an intervention?]

- Lack of experience or understanding among family members of how best to support mothers and babies.
- Not enough opportunities to communicate with other breastfeeding mothers.
- Lack of up-to-date instruction and information from health care professionals.
- Hospital practices that make it hard to get started with successful breastfeeding.
- Lack of accommodation to breastfeed or express milk at the workplace.

According to the 2016 Breastfeeding Report Card published by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 81.1% of infants born in 2013 started to breastfeed, 51.8% were breastfeeding at 6 months, and 30.7% were breastfeeding at 12 months (2). These high rates in the initiation of breastfeeding show that most mothers in the US want to breastfeed, but the low rates at 6 and 12 months indicate many do not continue as recommended. This could be due to mothers not getting the support they need from healthcare providers, family members or employers, or perhaps it is due to an inability to provide enough supply for their child.

The Children's Hospital of The King's Daughters Milk Bank (a JLNVB partner) recognizes the issue that sometimes a mother simply cannot provide an adequate supply of their own breast milk for preterm or critically ill infants. According to the CDC, each year preterm birth affects nearly half a million babies (about 1 in 8) born in the US (3). The risk of premature or sick babies developing devastating and potentially life threatening intestinal infections is 10 times higher if they are fed formula instead of breast milk. Breast milk significantly decreases the odds of life-threatening complications and infections in premature infants during the first months of life. Currently, the supply of donor human milk does not meet the demands of babies that would benefit from it (3).

Breastfeeding is an important, yet often stigmatized, issue when it comes to breastfeeding outside of the home and donor-sourced breast milk. Increasing awareness, education, acceptance, and general resources to advocating for breastfeeding and breast milk's benefits is essential to having healthier mothers and children.

RESOURCES

1. <https://www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/calls/breastfeeding/factsheet.html>
2. <https://www.cdc.gov/breastfeeding/pdf/2016breastfeedingreportcard.pdf>
3. <http://www.chkd.org/Our-Services/Specialty-Care-and-Programs/Milk-Bank/>