



Breastfeeding  
and returning  
to work

**This booklet has been written to help pregnant women and new mothers who are thinking about combining breastfeeding and working.**

## Questions you may have

### Why should I keep on breastfeeding after I go back to work?

- The longer you breastfeed, the greater the health benefits for both you and your baby. A list of breastfeeding health benefits is on page 11.
- Breastfeeding after the first few months is still important to your baby's health because your milk contains important antibodies and special factors which are there to help your baby develop – these are absent from formula milk.
- Women who have managed to continue breastfeeding say they really enjoy the calmness and relaxation that breastfeeding provides, particularly at the end of a busy day.
- For some mothers, continuing to breastfeed helps them to lose the extra weight which can be difficult to shift after pregnancy.
- If full breastfeeding is not possible, then even one or two breastfeeds a day will still benefit your baby's health.

If you intend to continue breastfeeding when you go back to work, you will need to think about how your baby is going to be fed. It's a good idea to start planning at least a few weeks before you are going back to work (see checklist on page 12).



*“I’m so glad I kept on breastfeeding, it is such a great bond”*

## How will my employer benefit from supporting breastfeeding workers?

- More mothers will return to work, which reduces the need to take on new staff and train them.
- Children who are or were breastfed are healthier, so this will mean fewer visits to the doctor and less time off to care for sick children.
- Women who breastfeed are healthier and are less likely to suffer certain serious illnesses, such as breast cancer, ovarian cancer or osteoporosis.
- Better support for workers will increase morale and loyalty, and the business or organisation will become more attractive to future employees.

The PHA has produced a booklet for employers entitled *Promoting breastfeeding for mothers returning to work: a guide for employers*. Download it from [www.publichealth.hscni.net](http://www.publichealth.hscni.net) or ask your health visitor for a copy.



## How can I deal with the challenges of breastfeeding when I go back to work?

It is important that you plan ahead as much as possible. This needs to start with letting your employer know in writing that you intend to continue breastfeeding and that you will need some privacy and a little extra time at breaks to express milk or, if possible, feed your baby. In line with HSENI guidance, your employer has a duty to assess and manage any risk to your health or your baby's health and provide adequate welfare facilities for breastfeeding.

You then need to prepare for going back by deciding how your baby will be fed while you are at work. There are several options:

- If you can arrange childcare for your baby close to where you work, you could breastfeed during breaks and immediately before and after work.
- You could continue to breastfeed at home and then express milk while at work. This way you will be able to keep up your milk supply and your baby can be fed your milk from a cup or a bottle.
- You could ask to work flexible hours outside the times your baby would need fed. Alternatively, you might be able to reduce your hours for a short time, just until your baby needs fewer breastfeeds.
- Or you could combine breastfeeding with formula feeds. This would mean continuing to breastfeed when at home and then your baby having formula when you are at work.



*“My boss was very helpful. He asked me what support I needed for returning to work and we agreed breaks I would need. Without this I wouldn’t have been able to go back as early and continue giving my baby breastmilk. My employer made me feel like a valued member of staff”.*

## How will I be able to express milk at work?

If you would normally breastfeed your baby during the hours you are at work then you will probably need to express your milk to feel comfortable. First, you will need to find a suitable place to express. Discuss this with your employer as soon as possible before you plan to go back and explain that you will need somewhere quiet and private. A toilet is not a suitable place. If you are worried about the attitudes of your work colleagues you can explain that you would prefer to keep your request confidential and would appreciate support from management. Your health visitor or midwife will be able to help you plan ahead and to support you with your decision to continue breastfeeding.

You will also need to ask your employer for some time to express milk. This will be reviewed as part of the risk assessment process. Your employer should be careful not to discriminate against breastfeeding employees. Extra breaks or at least an extended lunch break will need to be agreed. The number of expressing breaks you’ll need will depend on your baby’s age and how often he or she usually feeds.

If your baby is six months or older you may only need to express once or twice during a full day. While some mothers can express milk quickly and may only need 10 minutes to express, for most women it takes an average of 20 minutes.

You can express milk using a manual, battery or electric breast pump or if you are experienced at hand expressing you may be able to express milk without the need for a breast pump.

It's a good idea to start expressing milk at home a few weeks before you go back to work. That way you will be used to expressing and you'll know how long it takes. You will also be able to save and freeze the milk ready for your return to work.

There is a knack to expressing and it can take a while before you are able to express much milk. Some mothers find that at first they can only express a small amount. It will help if you relax, think about feeding your baby or maybe look at a photo, and allow time for your milk hormones to be released which will help start the milk flowing. Warmth and gentle breast massage will also help to stimulate the milk flow.

## What will I need to express milk at work?

At work you will need to have a space available which is warm, clean and private, with a comfortable chair.

If you are going to use a breast pump you will need a pump that works well for you. If your pump is electric then you will need a room with an electric socket.

You will need to bring sterilised bottles for your expressed milk and a cool bag with ice blocks for taking it home. Ideally you should be able to store your milk in a refrigerator; if this isn't possible then your milk can be stored in the cool bag until you get home.

If you are going to need to express more than once a day while at work, you will need a wash hand basin so that you can wash, rinse and dry your breast pump parts before use (see page 7).

It's also a good idea to keep an extra top at work and plenty of breast pads, as leaking can sometimes happen when you least expect it



*“I take two breaks of about 20 minutes each day at work to express milk for my baby to drink the following day. As I work three days a week, this keeps my supply up so that I can still feed her myself on the days I am at home”*

(particularly at times when you would normally feed if you were at home, or when you just happen to think about your baby).

## How should I clean breast pump equipment at home and at work?

- when at home disinfect your breastpump equipment in accordance with manufacturer’s instructions;
- when at work after each expression rinse each piece that comes into contact with breast milk in cool water as soon as possible after pumping;
- wash each piece separately using a good brand of washing up liquid and plenty of warm water;
- rinse each piece thoroughly with cooled boiled water for 10–15 seconds;

- place the pieces neatly on a clean paper towel or in a clean drying rack and allow them to air dry (we suggest drying on kitchen roll);
- avoid using cloth towels to dry your pump parts because they can carry germs and bacteria that are harmful to your breast milk and your baby;
- once the pump parts are dry, assemble the pump (before you store it or use it) and store in a clean plastic box or zip-lock bag;
- try not to touch the inside of any parts that will come in contact with your breast milk.

## How long will my milk keep?

Ideally, breastmilk should be placed in a refrigerator after expressing and then it will keep in the fridge for three to five days providing the temperature is kept at between 2° and 4°C.

If there isn't a fridge available at work, you can keep your milk in a cool bag with ice blocks until you get home.

Breastmilk that isn't going to be used within five days should be frozen. It is important to label the milk with the date when it was expressed. Milk will keep in a freezer for six months. Milk frozen and stored in the small top shelf freezer compartment of a refrigerator will only keep for three weeks.

## What do I do if my baby won't take a bottle?

Some breastfed babies refuse to take milk from a bottle. This is because they enjoy the closeness of breastfeeding and they dislike the feel of an artificial teat. If your baby won't feed from a bottle, then a feeding cup can be used instead while you are at work.

If you would like your baby to take a bottle, it can help to start offering an occasional bottle of expressed milk once breastfeeding is well established and at least a few weeks before you go back to work. If your baby refuses to take a bottle from you, get someone else to try. It may help if at first you leave the room when the bottlefeed is given, because if your baby can see you and smell your milk it will make him or her want the real thing! Babies will usually be more open to accepting a new method of feeding when they are relaxed and not very hungry. Never try to force your baby to feed from a bottle.



# Breastfeeding information and support

General information about breastfeeding is available from the website [www.breastfedbabies.org](http://www.breastfedbabies.org) which has been created specifically for parents in Northern Ireland. You can also find a list of local breastfeeding support groups on [www.breastfedbabies.org](http://www.breastfedbabies.org)

If you would like to speak to someone who can offer support and advice about breastfeeding, you can call the National Breastfeeding Helpline on 0300 100 0212.



# Legislation relating to breastfeeding and working

The **Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations (NI) 2000** state that, under this legislation, the breastfeeding mother must notify her employer in advance of her return to work if she wants to continue breastfeeding.

New mothers are protected if the health of the mother or the baby is at risk. Having to stop breastfeeding would potentially put the health of mother and baby at risk.

The **Workplace (Health, Safety and Welfare) Regulations (NI) 1993** require employers to provide suitable rest facilities for pregnant women and breastfeeding mothers.

The **Employment rights (NI) Order 1996** states that if your work is no longer suitable while pregnant or breastfeeding, the employer must try to find alternative work on the same pay. If no suitable work is available, then the employee should be offered a leave of absence on full pay on maternity grounds.

The **Sex Discrimination (NI) Order 1976** provides protection to pregnant women and those on maternity leave against discrimination.

Guidance from the **Health and Safety Executive Northern Ireland (HSENI)**, *New and expectant mothers who work*, details the action an employer should take to protect the health and safety of pregnant women and new mothers. The leaflet can be viewed on [www.hseni.gov.uk](http://www.hseni.gov.uk)

## Useful contacts

### HSENI

[www.hseni.gov.uk](http://www.hseni.gov.uk)  
Tel: 028 9024 3249

### Equality Commission

[www.equalityni.org](http://www.equalityni.org)  
Tel: 028 9050 0600

### Labour Relations Agency

[www.lra.org.uk](http://www.lra.org.uk)  
028 9032 1442

### Maternity Action

[www.maternityaction.org.uk](http://www.maternityaction.org.uk)  
Tel: 020 7253 2288

# Health benefits of breastfeeding

Breastfed babies are at reduced risk of:

- gastroenteritis (severe vomiting and diarrhoea)
- chest and ear infections
- kidney infections
- eczema
- childhood diabetes
- obesity

Women who breastfeed are at reduced risk of:

- breast cancer
- ovarian cancer
- osteoporosis (bone thinning)

The longer breastfeeding continues, the more significant the benefits to health will be. The World Health Organization recommends that ideally babies should be exclusively breastfed for the first six months and then that breastfeeding should continue after solids have started until the second year of life and beyond.

# Checklist for returning to work

- Before you return to work, write to your employer and let them know you are breastfeeding
- Decide how your baby will be fed while you are at work eg bottle or cup, breastmilk or formula
- Decide if you need to express milk while at work
- Practise expressing your milk using a pump or by hand
- Learn about safe storage of breastmilk (see page 7)
- Have a few trial runs before you go back to work.



**Public Health Agency**  
12-22 Linenhall Street, Belfast BT2 8BS.  
Tel: 0300 555 0114 (local rate).  
[www.publichealth.hscni.net](http://www.publichealth.hscni.net)

Find us on:

