

# Breastfeeding

## Headlines

Breastfeeding, especially if sustained for the first six months of life, can make a major contribution to an infant's health and their later life as well as better maternal health.

Breastfeeding levels in England remains amongst the lowest in Europe. Levels of breast feeding at 6-8 weeks between October to December 2010 was 46% in south Kirklees and 35% in north Kirklees, 41% overall.

## Why is this issue important?

Breast milk is the best form of nutrition for infants. World Health Organisation (WHO) guidance recommends exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of life, with breastfeeding continuing after this age, along with other types of solid foods. A large and growing body of evidence shows breastfeeding is associated with better infant and maternal health<sup>1</sup>. For the child, breastfeeding reduces the risks of:

- Diabetes, obesity<sup>2</sup> and respiratory illnesses.
- Death before the age of one year<sup>3</sup> (p25) and sudden infant death syndrome.
- Childhood leukaemia.
- Glue ear and other ear infections and the need for orthodontic treatments.

Benefits to the mother include lower risks of diabetes, pre-menopausal breast cancer<sup>4</sup>, ovarian cancer<sup>5</sup> and osteoporosis. It also increases the likelihood of returning to pre-pregnancy weight.

Despite these benefits, breastfeeding rates in England remain amongst the lowest in Europe<sup>6</sup>. Initiation rates (defined as the child being put to the breast at least once) in England in 2005 were 78%, but by six weeks breastfeeding rates were down to 50%. At six months, only 26% of mothers were still breastfeeding, with less than 1% doing so exclusively<sup>7</sup>. Across Kirklees in December 2010, 41% of mothers were still breastfeeding at 6-8 weeks from birth, compared to 45% nationally.

## What significant factors are affecting this issue?

Across the United Kingdom almost 8 in 10 (79%) first time mothers breastfed their babies initially compared with 73% of mothers who were having their second or later baby<sup>7</sup>.

There is a clear association between breastfeeding and social class, as 88% of mothers in managerial and professional occupations breastfed initially, compared with 77% of mothers in intermediate occupations, 65% of mothers in routine and manual occupations, and mothers who had never worked<sup>7</sup>.

## Which groups are affected most by this issue?

The focus for action is disadvantaged white women, particularly teenage and low income, first time or lone mothers<sup>8</sup>. Initiation rates are particularly low among white women in the UK at 70%, compared to women who are Indian (85%), black Caribbean (94%) or mixed ethnicity (88%)<sup>8</sup>.

There is a clear association between breastfeeding and educational level. Nationally, mothers leaving full time education at age 16 or younger were least likely to breastfeed, 59%, while those leaving at 18 years or older were most likely to breastfeed, 91%<sup>7</sup>.

## Where is this causing greatest concern?

Women breastfeeding at 6-8 weeks between October and December 2010 was 46% in south Kirklees and 35% in north Kirklees (41% overall).

## Views of local people

"But I see a big baby as a healthy baby basically. If you're a skinny baby, no offence, but it's like when a skinnier baby gets poorly, they don't eat, they're going to lose the weight, they're going to be a bag of bones. Whereas a baby like this, if she's not eating because she's unwell she's still going to be chunky, she's still going to have meat on her." (young parent, north Kirklees)\*

Local people have identified a need for more breastfeeding support in maternity units from clinical staff and breastfeeding peer supporters. The Baby Bistros are also popular.

"I think the Baby Bistros are a great idea and I'm really excited about being involved. Breastfeeding can be pretty hard as a new mum and you never know whether what you're doing is right or wrong. But these Baby Bistros will help because mums can get reassurance from people who have experienced what they're going through. There isn't any judgement here and it gives mums a chance to get together with their babies, share tips and encourage each other to continue breastfeeding." (20-35 year old female, breastfeeding mother and peer supporter).

## What could commissioners and service planners consider?

A comprehensive programme of activity across acute and community sectors to ensure that women are supported to breastfeed as long as they wish.

Implement a structured programme, using the Baby Friendly Initiative (BFI) as a minimum standard, to encourage breastfeeding and increase the availability of supportive environments.

Provide local, easily accessible breastfeeding peer support programmes in Kirklees and continue to develop Baby Bistros and Baby Cafes.

Harnessing intergenerational support, including that from grandparents, to boost support for breastfeeding and healthier weaning practices.

\* Voices of children and young people quoted are from local involvement projects and social marketing insight.

## References

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