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# Guidance on Breastfeeding and the Workplace



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## Introduction

NIPSA has long recognised that rights for working mothers are not just a women's issue and NIPSA is committed to developing and protecting workplace rights that support working parents and vigorously campaigns for work-life balance policies to assist working parents combine work and caring responsibilities. NIPSA is committed to ensuring that women who want to continue breastfeeding on returning to work are provided with appropriate working arrangements and facilities.

According to the World Health Organisation, Breastfeeding is an unequalled way of providing ideal food for the healthy growth and development of infants; it is also an integral part of the reproductive process with important implications for the health of mothers<sup>1</sup> and, as well as benefitting mother and child, robust breastfeeding policies can also help employers.

Whilst it is acknowledged that not all mothers can or wish to breastfeed, and this should be a matter of personal choice, it is important that there are policies and support mechanisms in place for those who do.

## Benefits for Baby, Mother and Employer

The following section outlines some of the benefits which continuing to breastfeed after return to work can have for mother, infant and employer.

### Benefits for Baby

Breast milk is the natural first food for babies, it provides all the energy and nutrients that the infant needs for the first months of life, and it continues to provide up to half or more of a child's nutritional needs during the second half of the first year, and up to one-third during the second year of life.

Breast milk promotes sensory and cognitive development, and protects the infant against infectious and chronic diseases. Exclusive breastfeeding reduces infant mortality due to common childhood illnesses such as diarrhoea or pneumonia, and helps for a quicker recovery during illness. These effects can be measured in resource-poor and affluent societies.<sup>2</sup>

Antibodies in breast milk stimulate a baby's immune system and help protect them from infection and other illnesses including<sup>3</sup>:

- stomach infections, vomiting and diarrhoea
- ear and chest infections
- kidney infections
- cow's milk allergy, asthma and eczema
- sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS)
- childhood diabetes
- childhood obesity

## Benefits for Mother

Breastfeeding is good for the mother's health and wellbeing<sup>4</sup>. The longer a woman breastfeeds, the stronger the protection against serious illness later in life. Breastfeeding mothers are at lower risk of:

- breast cancer
- ovarian cancer
- osteoporosis (bone thinning)
- type 2 diabetes
- Breastfeeding also helps a woman to regain their pre-pregnancy weight more easily

There are other benefits to breastfeeding:

- it's free: there is no need for formula milk, bottles, teats or sterilising equipment
- breast milk is always available, with the right ingredients at the right temperature, so it's easier to feed at night or on the go
- breastfeeding forms a bond between mother and child as they see their baby grow and develop healthily
- it's environmentally friendly because there's no manufacturing, pollution, packaging or waste

## Benefits to the Employer

In addition to the health and financial benefits to mother and baby, there are also benefits to employers of having robust breastfeeding policies and supporting breastfeeding mothers.<sup>5</sup>

**Reduced absenteeism:** Parents need to take less time off to care for sick children as breastfed babies will be healthier throughout their childhood.

**Increased productivity:** With less absenteeism, work is not disrupted.

**Improved staff morale:** An employer will enjoy better relations with their staff, resulting in a more motivated, committed and productive workforce.

**Lower staff turnover:** Breastfeeding mothers are more likely to return to work and more likely to do so earlier if an employer supports them to continue breastfeeding. This will save the employer the cost of replacing and training staff.

**Positive corporate image:** Staff and customers are more loyal to companies that have a family-friendly approach. This can result in greater productivity, easier staff recruitment, better public goodwill and higher shareholder value.

**Cost-benefits:** Employers who support their employees to continue breastfeeding find that the savings in reduced absenteeism and recruitment costs far outweigh the cost of providing breaks and facilities for breastfeeding.

# Legislation relating to Breastfeeding and Working

The **Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations (NI) 2000** state that the breastfeeding mother must notify her employer in advance of her return to work if she wants to continue breastfeeding. The employer should conduct a workplace risk assessment, taking into consideration any advice from the employee's midwife or GP. If risks are identified, the employer should take any reasonable steps to remove or reduce the risk. If this is not possible, the employer must offer alternatives, e.g.

- Change the employee's work hours
- Offer alternative work at the same wage
- Offer her a leave of absence from work on paid leave as long as necessary.

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 breastfeeding mothers (see section below on suitable facilities).

The **Employment Rights (NI) Order 1996** states that if a woman's work is no longer suitable when breastfeeding, the employer has a duty to offer the woman suitable and appropriate 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 and has the right to be paid while she is on leave.

The **Sex Discrimination (NI) Order 1976** protects employees from suffering less favourable employment terms, opportunities and conditions due to them breastfeeding their babies. If an employer refuses to accommodate a breastfeeding employee, the employer may be considered guilty of sex discrimination.

**Council Directive 92/85/EEC (19 October 1992)** introduced measures to encourage improvements in the safety and health at work of pregnant workers and workers who have recently given birth or are breastfeeding.

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 at [www.hseni.gov.uk](http://www.hseni.gov.uk).

## Supporting Breastfeeding Mothers in the Workplace

### Paid Breaks for Breastfeeding Mothers

Lactation breaks are breaks to express milk or to breastfeed babies. These breaks are essential if a woman is to maintain her milk supply and her comfort during working hours. Each individual woman will vary in relation to the number of times and amount of time she needs for lactation breaks and best practice will allow the frequency and duration of lactation breaks to be flexible and tailored to meet the needs of each employee. Lactation options to support working mothers include:

- Paid time off to express breast milk or to breastfeed her baby at the workplace.
- A period of time off to breastfeed at another location without loss of pay.
- Allow lunch and other breaks to be taken to coincide with feeding times.

## Workplace Facilities

Facilities for expressing breast milk or breastfeeding do not involve a lot of expense. But simply placing a chair in the ladies toilets is not acceptable from any perspective including the health, safety and welfare of workers.

A breastfeeding employee may ask for a private, hygienic, safe and secure area where she can express milk, this could be an unoccupied office or an area used for meetings that can be discreetly screened. If in doubt an employer should ask the employee what would be most appropriate.

### Facilities should include:

**A Private Room:** A clean hygienic and private area with lockable door in which women can express breast milk or breastfeed their baby.

**Refrigerator:** secure dedicated refrigerator for storing breast milk.

**Storage:** a lockable storage cupboard/locker for storing/sterilising pumping equipment.

**Comfortable chairs:** to use while expressing or breastfeeding.

**A table:** to support the breast pump and any other equipment.

**A power point:** for mothers who use an electric breast pump.

**Sink:** Ideally the room will also have hand washing facilities but access to a place to wash hands and equipment is essential.

**A changing mat and refuse bin.**

## The Breastfeeding Friendly Workplace Policy

It is good practice for an employer to have a policy on breastfeeding which sets out how requests from employees returning from maternity leave for changes to their working conditions would be considered. This will help employers make fair decisions when handling a request. Negotiating a Work and Breastfeeding Policy should encourage an understanding of the value of breastfeeding and a positive attitude to breastfeeding among all staff. Breastfeeding policies should ensure that mothers are supported to breastfeed for as long as they choose to do so.

The policy can be used to:

- Assure women that the organisation is supportive of their combining breastfeeding with working.
- Outline workplace provisions to enable women to maintain breastfeeding.
- Outline the employer's commitment to best practice in helping employees balance their work and family life through the provision of family friendly policies such as flexible working, paid lactation breaks etc.

An employer should ensure that all staff are aware of the policy. This could be done through a staff notice, staff website and during the induction or other training courses. All women who are going on Maternity Leave should be provided with a copy of the policy. The aim should be to change the culture of the work place so that breastfeeding at work and the provision of facilities is seen as normal.

## Further Information and Support Services

### Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance

NIPSA is the largest Trade Union in Northern Ireland, representing over 40,000 workers across the Civil and Public Services. NIPSA Representatives campaign for better terms and conditions for all our members, including breastfeeding mothers.

NIPSA's Representatives in your workplace will be able to assist you with advice and guidance on breastfeeding policies and your rights at work. For more information or to find your local NIPSA Representative contact:

NIPSA	Email: <a href="mailto:info@nipisa.org.uk">info@nipisa.org.uk</a>
54 Wellington Park	Phone: 02890 661831
Belfast	Facebook: <a href="https://www.facebook.com/nipsaunion">https://www.facebook.com/nipsaunion</a>
BT9 6DP	Online: <a href="http://www.nipisa.org.uk">http://www.nipisa.org.uk</a>

### NI Direct

NI Direct is the Northern Ireland Government's internet portal, with information on a range of topics, including breastfeeding and your rights at work.

<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/breastfeeding>

### Local Breastfeeding Support Groups

The Public Health Agency maintains a list of local breastfeeding support groups across Northern Ireland. You can find a group near you by following this link:

[https://www.breastfedbabies.org/locations?keys=&type\[\]=support\\_group](https://www.breastfedbabies.org/locations?keys=&type[]=support_group)

### Health and Social Care Trusts

**Belfast:** <http://belfasttrust-maternitieservices.hscni.net/Breastfeedingpeersupport.htm>

**Northern:** <http://www.northerntrust.hscni.net/services/1016.htm>

**South Eastern:** <http://www.setrust.hscni.net/healthyliving/2457.htm>

**Southern:** <http://www.southerntrust.hscni.net/2788.htm>

**Western:** <http://www.westernttrust.hscni.net/services/2414.htm>

### Voluntary Agencies

**Northern Ireland La Leche League Breastfeeding Helpline: 028 9581 8118**

**La Leche League National Breastfeeding Helpline: 0845 120 2918**

Lines open 7 days per week, up to 9 pm (24 hours if necessary, voicemail after 10 pm)

**National Breastfeeding Helpline: 0300 100 0212**

Lines open 7 days per week, including Public Holidays, 9.30 am - 9.30 pm

**National Childbirth Trust helpline: 0300 3300 771**

Lines open 7 days per week, including Public Holidays, 8.00 am - 10.00 pm

**Breastfeeding Network helpline: 0300 100 0210**

Lines open 7 days per week, including Public Holidays, 9.30 am - 9.30 pm

**Association of Breastfeeding Mothers helpline: 0844 412 2949**

Lines open 7 days per week, including Public Holidays, 9.30 am - 10.30 pm

