

WORKING AND BREASTFEEDING

By Lucia Leyfield and Karen Temple, Breastfeeding Counsellors

'Women have always worked and breastfed. Now that we travel further to work places where babies are not welcome, it has become more difficult. Yet with careful planning, breastfeeding is still possible, even if you will be apart from your baby most of the day'.

Breastfeeding for Beginners by Caroline Deacon (2002)

Although the maternity leave entitlement is now longer (26 weeks), some mothers may be returning to work whilst they are still breastfeeding. There are options and legal rights that allow a mother to carry on breastfeeding as long as she wishes.

The legal bit

The law does not directly allow for women in the UK to delay the return to work from maternity leave or to have paid or unpaid breaks to breastfeed or express milk during working hours. However, the law can still help. The Health and Safety legislation and the Sex Discrimination Act allow women in the UK to have rights.

Health and Safety Legislation and the Sex Discrimination Act 1975

The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 (MHSW) include regulations that protect the health and safety of new and expectant mothers who work. Under the Sex Discrimination Act 1975, if an employer fails to protect the health and safety of their pregnant workers, it is automatically considered sex discrimination.ⁱ

An employer is required to carry out a risk assessment for all his / her employees. This must also include specific risks to females of childbearing age who may become pregnant. The mother must provide her employer with written notification that she is breastfeeding, so that a specific health and safety risk assessment can be carried out. Until your employer has received written notification from you, they are not obliged to take any action other than those resulting from the risk assessment for all their employees.

The employer is required to provide somewhere for pregnant and breastfeeding mothers to rest. The HSE recommends that; "it is good practice to provide a private, healthy and safe environment for nursing mothers to express and store milk (but it is not a legal requirement). It is not suitable to use toilets for this purpose."

"Risks whilst pregnant may be from physical, biological and chemical agents, working conditions and processes. However there may be additional risks to consider if the mother is breastfeeding. These could include: working with organic mercury, radioactive material

and exposure to lead". If a risk is identified then actions must be considered, such as: removing the risk, adjusting hours / conditions. The HSE provides a flow chart for actions.

There is much evidence that breastfeeding is beneficial to the health of both mother and baby. Therefore, it should be highlighted that not breastfeeding may itself be considered a risk.

How can breastfeeding and working be combined? There are some options to consider.

What are the options?

1. Combined feeding (breastfeeding and formula feeding)

It is perfectly possible to breastfeed your baby whilst you are with her and let a childminder formula feed her whilst you are working. It may be that expressing milk at work is proving to be tricky or that your job is long and stressful. Combined feeding works well for many mums and babies as it provides flexibility along with the benefits of continued breastfeeding for mum and baby.

You will need to cut down on feeds very gradually dropping one feed every 5-7 days. This allows your breasts to adjust to demand so planning well in advance to your return is helpful. Your breasts may feel uncomfortable so pumping a little of the milk off (enough to relieve the discomfort) is important in avoiding mastitis.

2. Continued breastfeeding (breast only)

You may feel that despite your return to work that you want your baby to continue to receive only your milk, especially if you have a family history of allergies, or eczema, asthma etc. Your childminder / nursery needs to feel confident about storing and handling expressed breast milk (EBM). In addition, arrangements need to be made with your employer for expressing and storage. It may be helpful to speak to other mums who have expressed at work.

It is difficult to express when you are tense so it really does help to sort out everything before you go back to work. A clean, private environment really helps along with a photo of your baby to get your milk flowing. It is also important to look after yourself so eat well before you express and try to have a break in the day, which is relaxing rather than expressing! Battery or electric pumps are very efficient in pumping milk in a short space of time.

Storage is also important. If you are storing your milk in the works fridge, make sure that it is clearly marked! If a fridge is not available, EBM will keep in a well insulated cool bag with ice packs for a few hours.

3. Formula feeding (formula only)

For many women returning to work can mark the end of their breastfeeding experience. It is a revelation to many that breast and formula can be combined. Some women feel that the

time is right to finish feeding and returning to work is a time of positive transition from breast to formula. It can be helpful to talk this through with an understanding friend, partner or a breastfeeding counsellor. If you decide that formula feeding is the best option for you, then your health visitor will be able to show you how to correctly make up a feed.

Even if you find that you can't continue breastfeeding when you are back at work, remember that breastfeeding even for a short time is better for both of you than never having breastfed.

If you would like to talk about returning to work or any aspect of breastfeeding please feel free to call Lucia Leyfield and Karen Temple, NCT Breastfeeding Counsellors.

Further information:

- A Guide for new and expectant mothers who work. The Health and Safety Executive. www.hse.gov.uk.
- The Maternity Alliance, an independent national charity, which dealt specifically in working to improve the rights and services for all pregnant women, new mothers and their families, unfortunately closed in December 2005. Their website directs you to 'Working Families' for information on employment related issues. www.workingfamilies.org.uk. Maternity alliance publications can be purchased from the NCT www.nctresources.co.uk.
- Breastfeeding and returning to work leaflet. The Breastfeeding Network website. Leaflets and publications can be accessed. www.breastfeedingnetwork.org/information/articles.php.
- The Baby Friendly Initiative. <http://www.babyfriendly.org.uk/health.asp>.
- Breastfeeding. How to express and store your milk. NCT booklet £2.50. www.nctresources.co.uk.

ⁱ A Guide for New and expectant mothers who work. The Health and Safety Executive. www.hse.gov.uk.

The Breastfeeding Network. Breastfeeding and returning to work leaflet. See above.