

Promoting breastfeeding for mothers returning to work

A guide for employers



Why support mothers to continue breastfeeding on return to work?

There are **business benefits for employers and health benefits for employees.**

Research has shown that the benefits of improving health in the workplace include:

- increased motivation of employees and a better working atmosphere, leading to more flexibility and better communication;
- a reduction in absenteeism and staff turnover;
- increased quality of products and services, more innovation and creativity, and a rise in productivity;
- improved public image of the company, making it more attractive as an employer.

The number of women with babies and small children who return to the workforce is increasing. More mothers are also choosing to continue to breastfeed after returning to work. It is in the employer's best interests to support mothers who want to return to work and continue breastfeeding, as there are benefits for both employers and employees.

The benefits for employers and employees

Three good reasons for employers.

More economical

Your organisation will save money as valued employees will return to their job – reducing recruitment, training and temporary staff costs.

Less absenteeism

Breastfeeding helps to protect babies from infections and allergies. This means fewer visits to the doctor and less time off to care for sick children.

Better organisational image

An organisation that supports its employees becomes more attractive as an employer. Mothers will become more productive, happy and loyal.

Three health benefits for breastfeeding mums.

Breastfeeding mums have a lower risk of:

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

The longer a mother breastfeeds her baby, the greater the health benefits.

The legislation affecting mothers at work

By supporting breastfeeding mothers returning to work, you are complying with legislation.

There are three pieces of legislation which provide protection for breastfeeding women at work.

1. *Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000*

Any employee who is, or who could in the future be, a new or expectant mother is protected under this legislation. If the health of a pregnant or breastfeeding employee and her baby is potentially at risk then the employer must carry out a risk assessment and take any reasonable practical measures to control those risks.

If the mother is breastfeeding, she is responsible for notifying her employer. At this stage the employer should conduct a risk assessment, taking into consideration any advice from the employee's midwife or GP. If risks are identified, the employer must take steps to remove or reduce the risk. If this is not possible, the employer must offer alternatives, eg

- change the employee's work hours
- offer alternative work at the same wage
- suspend her from work on paid leave as long as necessary.

It's not just health and safety legislation that protects breastfeeding mothers at work.

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) recommends to employers that it is good practice to provide a private, healthy and safe environment for breastfeeding mothers to express and store milk (this is not a legal requirement). To find out more about the HSE recommendations and guidelines visit www.hse.gov.uk to see *A guide for new and expectant mothers who work*.

2. *The Employment Rights (Northern Ireland) Order 1996*

According to this order, if a woman's normal work is no longer suitable when she is pregnant or breastfeeding, her employer has a duty to offer her suitable and appropriate alternative work if possible. Where it is not possible, the employee may be suspended from work on maternity grounds and has a right to be paid while she is so suspended.

3. *Sex Discrimination (Northern Ireland) Order 1976*

This legislation protects employees from suffering less favourable employment terms, opportunities and conditions due to them breastfeeding their babies. If complaints of violations are made, the employer may be considered guilty of sex discrimination.

My boss was very positive. He asked me what support I needed for returning to work and we agreed breaks I would need. Without the support of my boss I wouldn't have been able to go back as early as I had and continue giving my baby breast milk. My employer made me feel like a valued member of staff.

Good practice for supporting breastfeeding mothers in the workplace

There are some **easy steps** you can take to **support employees**.

Employers can provide the following to encourage and support mothers returning to work who wish to continue breastfeeding:

Support for breastfeeding

Human resource policies and procedures should encourage an understanding of the value of breastfeeding and a positive attitude to breastfeeding among all staff. For example, as part of the return to work procedure following maternity leave, an employer could offer support for those mothers by accommodating any changes in working patterns or facilities needed.

Information for pregnant employees

An information pack for pregnant employees which contains a brief summary of the benefits of breastfeeding and an explanation of what support mothers can expect when they return to work would be helpful. This should also include details on how the employee can access this support. Sources of this information can be found at www.breastfedbabies.org/

Flexible working patterns

Different or flexible working patterns, such as a temporary change in working conditions or hours of work, should be offered to breastfeeding mothers. For example, employees should not be expected to work shifts or to attend training courses or meetings that would entail excessively long working days, which may make breastfeeding or expressing milk difficult.

Listening to what employees need will help you find out what you as an employer can do.

Breastfeeding or expressing milk during working hours

Where practical, employees should be given time off during working hours to breastfeed if their baby is cared for nearby, or to express breast milk. The length and number of such breaks vary, depending on what age the baby is when the mother returns to work. Agreements should be made according to individual need but the following is a rough guide:

- for a 2-6 months old baby, two to four breaks per day may be necessary;
- for a baby of 6 months or older, one to two breaks per day may be needed;
- the breaks should be approximately 20 minutes long.

Facilities for breastfeeding mothers

These should include:

- a clean and warm room/office where the employee can have privacy (the toilet is not a suitable place);
- a clean table or work surface for the sterilising equipment and pumps;
- a comfortable chair with good back support;
- an electric point for a breast pump, if necessary;
- a wash hand-basin nearby;
- a refrigerator or a cool bag for storing expressed breast milk at 2-4°C until it is taken home.

If it is not possible to devote a room solely to breastfeeding mothers, dual purpose areas (eg first aid room) or a shared facility may offer an alternative solution.

Help is at hand

For further information on promoting breastfeeding for mothers returning to work or for information you would like to provide to employees on the benefits of breastfeeding, the following websites are useful:

www.breastfedbabies.org

www.hse.gov.uk

www.lra.org.uk

www.equalityni.org



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