

Women's views and experiences of infant feeding practices in Ireland: Findings from the National Maternity Experience Survey

Róisín Murphy, Daniela Rohde, Conor Foley, Anna Maria Verling, Tracy O'Carroll, Rachel Flynn

Health Information and Quality Authority, Unit 1301, City Gate, Mahon, Cork.



Support and Encouragement

'Midwives in the hospital [were] fantastic. Very supportive, especially with breastfeeding. Public health nurses helped to build confidence and offered support.'

Information and advice

'Mixed advice regarding feeding my baby... All nurses had different advice, some very pushy on breastfeeding.'

'Breastfeeding wasn't encouraged. In my ward there were 4 women breastfeeding. The nurses advised three of us (that I heard) to supplement with formula, including me.'

'More information should be given regarding the pain of breastfeeding, I think this could prepare mothers better and encourage them to keep at it.'

Hospital environment and resources

'Drawn curtains & closed doors are rarely respected by auxiliary staff. A simple knock or call from behind the curtain would be much appreciated.'

Pressure to feed in a particular way

'One midwife manager in particular made me feel ashamed that my baby wasn't gaining weight fast enough and used the threat of keeping me in hospital repeatedly at a time I felt very vulnerable.'

Conclusion

Some women experience a lack of practical support with infant feeding, regardless of feeding method. Clear and concise information on feeding practices and home supports could help to support mothers on their feeding journey. Further education and standardised training may be beneficial for midwives and other healthcare professionals both in hospitals and the community to ensure consistent information and advice on feeding is given to mothers.

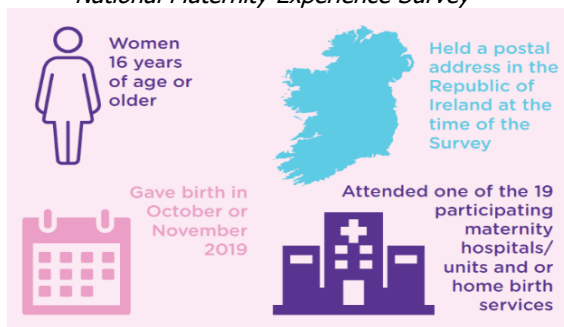
References

1. World Health Organization. Breastfeeding. 2021.
2. Unicef. Breastfeeding. A Mother's Gift for Every Child. 2018.
3. Health Service Executive. Irish Maternity Indicator System National Report 2019.
4. National Care Experience Programme. Findings of the National Maternity Experience) Survey. 2020
5. Murphy, R., Foley, C., Verling, A.M., O'Carroll, T., Flynn, R., Rohde, D., 2022. Women's experiences of initiating feeding shortly after birth in Ireland: A secondary analysis of quantitative and qualitative data from the National Maternity Experience Survey. Midwifery 107, 103263.

Full text available here:
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.midw.2022.103263>

We're committed to excellence in healthcare

Eligibility criteria for the National Maternity Experience Survey



Introduction

Breastfeeding is one of the most effective ways to ensure child health and survival.¹ An international report on the rates of infants who were ever breastfed found that Ireland ranked the lowest out of 121 countries, with 55%.² In 2019, 63.8% of mothers in Ireland initiated breastfeeding, while 37.3% exclusively breastfed at the time of discharge from hospital.³

Aim

To explore women's experiences of infant feeding in Ireland.

Methods

Secondary analysis of the National Maternity Experience Survey (NMES) 2020.⁴ Free-text comments that mentioned feeding, received in response to three open-ended questions, were analysed using thematic analysis.

Results

Of 3,204 women who participated in the survey, 720 (22.5%) women provided 824 comments that mentioned feeding, with approximately six times as many comments referring to breastfeeding compared to formula feeding. Four themes were identified.⁵

Summary of themes

Support and encouragement from healthcare professionals

- Some women experienced a lack of support, regardless of feeding method

Information and advice on feeding

- Some women received contradictory advice from healthcare professionals.

Pressure and respect for personal preferences

- Some women felt pressured to use a feeding method other than first preference.

Hospital environment and resources

- Staffing shortages and hospital facilities impacted women's experiences.