

Study to explore why women stop breastfeeding

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Eighty to 90 per cent of new mothers start breastfeeding when their baby is first born because they are aware of the enormous benefits of breastmilk, however 25 per cent of new mothers will have stopped breastfeeding by the time their baby is six weeks old. Why?

Associate Professor Virginia Schmied from the N-FORCE Research Group within the School of Nursing at UWS has received a \$100,000 Australian Research Council grant to answer this question, and will study the factors that influence this concerning trend - one that is impacting on Australian families' health and incurring significant health service costs.

Associate Professor Schmied says women's experiences of breastfeeding are unique and complex and their decisions about breastfeeding are influenced by many factors.

High on this list of contributing factors is the role and influence of health professionals such as midwives and lactation consultants.

"While professional support from midwives and lactation consultants can have a significant and positive effect on helping new mums to begin breastfeeding, unfortunately we're still not seeing an increase in the length of time that new mums continue to breastfeed," Associate Professor Schmied says.

Breastfeeding protects babies from a range of diseases, particularly gastroenteritis and ear infections, and is one of the most cost-effective

health promotion activities available.

Associate Professor Schmied is concerned that new mothers are not receiving the assistance and support that they need from health professionals in the early days following birth. She says more knowledge is needed about how midwives and lactation consultants understand their role, and how this role is carried out in caring for breastfeeding mothers.

"The health benefits of supporting women to breastfeed longer can be matched by the dollar savings that can be made. It is estimated that if the 60 per cent of mothers currently still breastfeeding beyond three months were to be increased to 80 per cent, a saving of approximately \$11.5 million in health costs could be made every year," Associate Professor Schmied says.

"By gaining an in-depth understanding of the practices that health professionals use to inform and encourage women to breastfeed, we can help to unveil the hidden factors that can ensure women are supported to breastfeed longer."

Source: University of Western Sydney

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