

Even part-time work can have a negative effect on breastfeeding rates, says new study

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Part-time and casual work among new mothers has almost as big a negative impact on breastfeeding rates as returning to work full-time, says a new study led by the University of Melbourne.

While previous studies have shown that women who return to full-time work are far less likely to be breastfeeding at six months, the new Australian study is the first to show dramatically reduced breastfeeding rates in those who return on a part-time or casual basis.

The paper, to be published in the May issue of *Acta Paediatrica*, says a lack of paid maternity leave and low workplace support for breastfeeding are interfering with the establishment of breastfeeding among Australian women.

Lead researcher Amanda Cooklin, from the University of Melbourne's Key Centre for Women's Health, and colleagues Susan Donath (Murdoch Children's Research Institute and University of Melbourne) and Lisa Amir (La Trobe University) analysed the breastfeeding rates among almost 3700 mothers and babies at six months after the birth.

They found:

-- Mothers who returned to work full-time within three months of birth were twice as likely to have stopped breastfeeding by the time their baby was six months, than those who were not employed;

-- Mothers who returned to work full time between three and six months of birth were three times as likely to have stopped breastfeeding by the time their baby was six months than non-employed women.

-- Women who returned to work on either a part-time or casual basis after three months were almost as likely to have stopped breastfeeding as those who worked full-time.

Ms Cooklin said study results showed that early postnatal employment was a significant risk factor for an early end to breastfeeding in Australian infants.

Ms Cooklin said the findings in relation to part-time and casual work were surprising.

Previous studies in the US had found mothers who worked part-time had similar breastfeeding patterns to those who were not employed.

“In Australia however, a reduced working week does not contribute to mothers’ ability to maintain breastfeeding for six months,” Ms Cooklin said.

“Part-time employment is almost as much of a risk factor as full-time employment for an early end to breastfeeding.”

Ms Cooklin said a lack of privacy, fatigue, inflexible work schedules and unsupportive employers and colleagues prevented many employed women from maintaining breastfeeding.

“Given that the provision of workplace support for breastfeeding remains a matter for individual negotiation, it’s not surprising that a return to work spells the end of breastfeeding for many women.”

Ms Cooklin said lack of paid maternity leave was also affecting breastfeeding rates.

“Many women return to work sooner than they would like for financial reasons and this interferes with the establishment of breastfeeding,” she said.

The World Health Organisation recommends exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of life.

However, only half of Australian infants receive any breast milk by six months and very few of these infants are exclusively breastfed.

Source: University of Melbourne

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