

Woman with a higher social standing and educational attainment breastfeed for longer

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New research analyses maternal breastfeeding in Spain throughout the second half of the twentieth century. Experts believe that its development is associated with socio-demographic factors such as the advice of healthcare professionals, longer maternity leave, a woman's integration into the workplace and her level of education.

"Up until not long ago, maternal breastfeeding was vital for infant survival but things have changed in the second half of the twentieth century. This is mainly due to the arrival of artificial lactation," explains Juan Ramón Ordoña, researcher at the University of Murcia, Spain and lead author of the study.

Published in the *Journal of Human Lactation*, the study analyses how maternal breastfeeding rates have evolved in the region of Murcia and, indeed, the rest of [Spain](#), in recent decades and whether women who had children in the 1960's behaved in the same way as those who had children in the 1980's or 1990's.

The average time that a mother breastfeeds has changed over the studied period. Ordoña confirms that "what our results show is a U-shaped graph. Women breastfed for longer periods of time in the 1960's (61.3% for longer than six months) and 1990's (29% also for longer than six months) whereas the shortest periods occurred in the 1970's and 1980's (14.4% and 19.2% respectively).

Researchers studied 666 women who had been first time mothers from a

period starting in the 1960's and ending in the 1990's. As well as gathering information on the child's diet, experts collected socio-demographic data with particular focus on the mother's [educational attainment](#).

Ordoñana outlines that "the effect of greater educational attainment on the duration of the breastfeeding period is not always the same and it very much depends on social context."

As such, women with medium and high educational attainment displayed drastically shorter breastfeeding periods at the beginning of the 1970's and the rates that correspond to this group were almost on a par with those of women with lower [education](#) attainment in the 1970's and 1980's. However, a subsequent steady increase of 3.4% each year was experienced and this trend remained until the end of the 1990's.

Researchers attribute these results to the fact that women with higher educational attainment follow the advice of [healthcare professionals](#) with greater ease in relation to the benefits of maternal breastfeeding. They emphasise that "providing the mother wishes to breastfeed, working conditions, economic status and greater access to healthcare services probably help to maintain breastfeeding levels."

The significance of social change

The study suggests that the results are linked to the social changes of the time and the impact that they had on women. For instance, large family structures in which different generations of women live together and help one another in the "art of lactating" have given way to the nuclear family where the woman increasingly leans on her partner for emotional and instrumental support, rather than on other women.

Equally, experts associate this change with the progressive integration of

woman into the workplace, the movement towards all things natural that was experienced at the end of the 1990's, the increase of [maternity leaves](#) and a large number of sociocultural factors that influence [women](#) before they even have their children.

Furthermore, with regard to the diet of newborns, the advice of healthcare professionals leaned towards artificial [lactation](#) in the 1970's and 1980's and then shifted towards encouraging breastfeeding. This change was due to the discovery of the health benefits that breastfeeding can bring as well as the advice of the World Health Organisation who recommends that [breastfeeding](#) should last for a minimum of 6 months.

More information: Juan R. Ordoñana et al.: "Relationship between Level of Education and Breastfeeding Duration Depends on Social Context: Breastfeeding Trends Over a 40-Year Period in Spain". J Hum Lact 2011 27: 272. [DOI: 10.1177/0890334411403929](https://doi.org/10.1177/0890334411403929)

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