

No more free infant formula at RI hospitals

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Rhode Island First Lady Stephanie Chafee, center, embraces Vice President of Patient Care Services of South County Hospital Barbara Seagrave following a news conference to discuss the state's efforts to encourage mothers to breastfeed infants, including eliminating the distribution of free infant formula to mothers when they are discharged from the hospital, at the State House in Providence, R.I., Monday, Nov. 28, 2011. (AP Photo/Michael Dwyer)

(AP) -- New mothers in Rhode Island will no longer leave the hospital with a free goody bag of infant formula.

To encourage breastfeeding, the state's seven birthing hospitals stopped formula giveaways this fall, apparently making it the first state to end the widespread practice.

State health officials hailed the decision Monday, noting that breastfeeding has been proved healthier than formula for both infants and [mothers](#). Stephanie Chafee, a nurse and the wife of Gov. Lincoln

Chafee, called the decision a critical step toward increasing [breastfeeding rates](#).

"As the first 'bag-free' state in the nation, Rhode Island will have healthier children, healthier mothers, and a healthier population as a whole," Chafee said. "This is a tremendous accomplishment."

Formula will still be available to [new mothers](#) who experience difficulties with breastfeeding.

The new policy isn't intended to force women into nursing their children, according to Denise Laprade, a labor and delivery nurse and lactation consultant at Woonsocket's Landmark Medical Center, which eliminated free formula distribution last month. She said the focus is instead on [parental education](#) and helping mothers decide what's best for their child.

"We never make any woman feel guilty about her decision," Laprade said. She said she has received few complaints from parents about the new policy, though she said the older nurses needed a little time to adjust.

Thirty-eight percent of Rhode Island mothers nurse their babies six months after birth, compared with 44 percent nationally, according to a report issued this year by the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#).

State Health Director Michael Fine said the state hopes to raise the percentage of Rhode Island mothers nursing at six months to 60 percent by 2020.

[Public health officials](#) in Massachusetts endorsed a ban on free formula samples in 2005, but the regulation was rescinded by then-Gov. Mitt

Romney before it took effect. Getting the new policy in place in small Rhode Island was easier, since it's not a law or regulation and required the agreement of only seven hospitals.

Nationally, about 540 of the nation's 3,300 birthing hospitals have stopped the formula giveaways, according to Marsha Walker, a registered nurse in Massachusetts and co-chairwoman of "Ban the Bags," a campaign to eliminate formula giveaways at maternity hospitals.

Walker said the bags given to new mothers - typically containing a few days' worth of formula - amount to a sophisticated marketing campaign by formula manufacturers.

"Hospitals should market health and nothing else," she said. "When hospitals give these out, it looks like an endorsement of a commercial product."

The International Formula Council, a trade group representing formula manufacturers, opposes the end of free formula samples. In a statement, the council notes that sample bags also include "key educational materials" on how to use and store formula.

"Mothers should be trusted to make good choices for their babies," the council said in its statement. "More than 80 percent of U.S. infants will be given formula at some point during their first year of life ... these educational materials are needed by the vast majority of mothers to ensure [infant formula](#) is prepared correctly and the baby's health is not jeopardized."

New mom Crystal Gyra said that while the new policy is well-intended, women should have the option of taking home formula samples. The Providence woman said she gladly accepted the free formula she received after giving birth to her daughter Gianna, now 2 months old.

Gyra gives her daughter formula.

"It helped me," she said of the samples. "They should leave it up to the women to decide whether they want to take the samples or not. We're smart enough to figure it out."

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