

# Black breast-feeding gatherings battle troubling health gaps

January 29 2015, by Lindsey Tanner

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Volunteer Monet Williams, center, holds a friend's baby whose mother is in a breast-feeding class as she talks to another volunteer at a YMCA in Milwaukee. Breast-feeding is thought to help protect against higher rates of infant mortality and childhood obesity, to more breast cancer deaths and heart disease in adults - and it's much less common among U.S. black women than in whites and others. Rates have improved in recent years but the disparity remains. (AP Photo/Darren Hauck)

Once a month, baby-toting young women gather in a YMCA conference

room to share tips, talk about and demonstrate breast-feeding—an age-old yet sometimes shunned practice in their community.

It's part of a grassroots movement that breast-feeding advocates think just might yield profound benefits—potentially helping diminish health gaps facing black Americans, from higher rates of infant mortality and childhood obesity, to more breast cancer deaths and heart disease in adults.

Breast-feeding is thought to help protect against these ills—and it's much less common among U.S. black women than in whites and others. Rates have improved in recent years but the disparity remains.

"In the African-American community, we don't see breast-feeding publicly—our sisters and aunts aren't breast-feeding in the living room, they're not talking about it in the kitchen. It's different in the Caucasian community," said Dalvery Blackwell, a lactation consultant-educator and co-founder of the Milwaukee-based African American Breastfeeding Network.

The networks' gatherings aim to change that. Similar groups meet in Detroit, Atlanta and other cities, organized by black women, for [black women](#). While promoting breast-feeding, they acknowledge obstacles that are more prevalent in black communities— absent partners, employers who discourage workplace nursing and flex time for new moms, hospitals that feed newborns formula.

The gatherings encourage new mothers to breast-feed for as long as possible; the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends doing it for at least a year.

Just over 60 percent of U.S. black mothers have tried breast-feeding but only 16 percent continue for a full year, federal data show. By

comparison, more than 80 percent of Hispanics and whites have tried it and at least 25 percent do it for a year.

A government report last year cited the breast-feeding network among efforts to improve rates. Dr. Myrtis Sullivan, a black pediatrician and former maternal and child health director for Illinois, said this type of community gathering can be particularly effective.

"The synergy that goes on when women interact with other women that are similar to them both culturally and socioeconomically ... seems to be very supportive for breast-feeding," Sullivan said.



A doll used for breast-feeding training sits on a table with literature during a class at a a YMCA in Milwaukee. Breast-feeding is thought to help protect against higher rates of infant mortality and childhood obesity, to more breast cancer deaths and heart disease in adults - and it's much less common among U.S. black women than in whites and others. Rates have improved in recent years but the disparity remains. (AP Photo/Darren Hauck)

At a recent Milwaukee gathering, mothers nursed and shared a meal provided by a University of Wisconsin public health partnership program. Blackwell offered tips about the best breast-feeding diet, how to hold a nursing baby, and signs that a baby is hungry.

Retail worker Leslie Curtis, 22, has breast-fed her 6-month-old son, Jace, since his birth. She said the meetings have helped her stick with it.

"I learn so much," she said. "I learn how to properly latch, properly pump, all the nutrition he's getting, I learn a lot and I love it."

Most of her friends think breast-feeding is too time-consuming, or too painful, and Curtis said her baby's father "doesn't understand the whole breast-feeding thing so I don't even try to explain it." But Curtis is determined to keep it up for their son's sake.

"Just coming to this group tells me why it's important," she said. "It's really healthy, I know what he's drinking and he's eating, compared to formula."

In Detroit, educator Kiddada Green runs the Black Mothers Breastfeeding Club as a modern-day old front porch, a place to encourage breast-feeding while building sisterhood. The club meets in women's homes, drawing a mix of working women and stay-at-home moms.

"We work with many women who have never seen a woman breast-feed," Green said. "We're making it visible."

"Although you're getting medical benefits, you're also getting connections and relationships and bonds that are also healthy for

women," she said.



Dalvery Blackwell, co-founder of the African American Breastfeeding Network, talks with young mothers as she holds a baby from an attendee at a class held at a YMCA in Milwaukee. Breast-feeding is thought to help protect against higher rates of infant mortality and childhood obesity, to more breast cancer deaths and heart disease in adults - and it's much less common among U.S. black women than in whites and others. Rates have improved in recent years but the disparity remains. (AP Photo/Darren Hauck)

Breast-feeding's benefits include fewer infant infections and reduced risks for [infant mortality](#), asthma, type 2 diabetes and obesity—which all disproportionately affect black children.

Effects on moms' long-term health are less studied but breast-feeding

has been linked with lower breast and ovarian cancer rates, while emerging research suggests women who breast-feed may have less heart disease later in life.

Reasons why some blacks shun breast-feeding vary but slavery's legacy is often cited among them. Breast-feeding was common in Africa but became a stigma when [women](#) were separated from their own children and forced to breast-feed slave-owners' babies, Blackwell said.

Kimarie Bugg, a nurse and founder of the Atlanta-based Reaching Our Sisters Everywhere, said many doctors never discuss [breastfeeding](#) with black patients "because they just assume they're not going to do it—they don't even mention it."



In this Thursday, Dec. 11, 2014 photo, Irena Bottoms uses a bottle to feed her baby as mothers and supportive family members attend a class on breast-feeding

at a YMCA in Milwaukee. Breast-feeding is thought to help protect against higher rates of infant mortality and childhood obesity, to more breast cancer deaths and heart disease in adults - and it's much less common among U.S. black women than in whites and others. Rates have improved in recent years but the disparity remains. (AP Photo/Darren Hauck)

No one thinks that breast-feeding is a magic panacea and scientific evidence is mixed on some of its purported advantages. But few experts dispute that breast milk is the best nourishment for infants, with potential lifelong benefits.

"We know there are significant underlying conditions that lead to poor health outcomes—socioeconomic disparities, racism—all play a part," said Laurence Grummer-Strawn, a longtime breast-feeding advocate and former chief of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's nutrition branch.

Lack of breast-feeding contributes and improving rates could help reduce disparities, although by how much is uncertain, he said.

**More information:** African American Breastfeeding Network: [aabnetwork.org](http://aabnetwork.org)

Office on Women's Health: [tinyurl.com/cba3o4f](http://tinyurl.com/cba3o4f)

CDC: [tinyurl.com/nb8gtfw](http://tinyurl.com/nb8gtfw)

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