

Study finds benefits of breastfeeding for mothers, not just babies

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Breastfeeding isn't only good for babies. It's also good for the health of mothers. It helps moms bond with their newborns, recover from childbirth and can reduce their risks of Type 2 diabetes, heart disease and breast cancer.

But breastfeeding rates are low for young moms, particularly low-income women of color.

An innovative study—funded by the California Breast Cancer Research Program with the help of donations from state tax filers—aims to address that issue and boost [breastfeeding rates](#) among young moms.

"It could really make a difference on the public health level," said co-investigator Alison Chopel. "If we find ways to increase breastfeeding, we'll see future savings to taxpayers."

Chopel's interests in the breastfeeding study are both personal and professional. She has firsthand experience as a young mother.

"I was aimless and barely making it through high school," she said. "Having a child changed my perspective. It put me on a completely different path."

Chopel now directs the California Adolescent Health Collaborative for the Public Health Institute and is teaming on the breastfeeding study with Danielle Soto of Brighter Beginnings, a nonprofit working to support children and families.

When Brighter Beginnings surveyed young moms, it found that only 3 percent still breastfed after six months, compared with more than half of mothers nationally.

Identifying barriers

Young moms know about the importance of breastfeeding, but they face social and structural barriers, Soto said.

The 18-month study, supported by \$150,000 in funding, aims to identify

those barriers and develop interventions.

A key barrier seems to be the stigma of being a young mom.

"They experience a lot of stigma and unwanted advice as [young mothers](#)," Chopel said. "A lot of people feel they shouldn't be mothers. They are judged. It makes it more challenging to breastfeed in public."

The researchers have been studying mothers 16-24 years old, most of whom are African American or Latina. They have been mapping where the mothers do and don't feel comfortable breastfeeding.

"Some say they would never breastfeed on BART. Another said she might," said Elva Castellanos with the Public Health Institute. "One said she would never breastfeed at church. One said she would feel comfortable there. One 17-year-old mom said, 'I wouldn't breastfeed anywhere.' There were no places she felt comfortable."

Finding a safe space to breastfeed can be a barrier. Many young moms go to school, work or do both. For example, one mom worked nights and didn't feel safe sitting in a parking lot at night pumping milk, Chopel said.

Caregiver attitudes also can be a barrier.

"Young mothers rely heavily on others to help with child care," Chopel said. "They can be susceptible to the opinions of those around them."

Involving the community

The study's community-based approach has helped increase its relevance, rigor and reach, researchers said. They formed an advisory committee that helped select key community stakeholders to interview

about young moms. Then, building on Brighter Beginnings' relationships with its clients, they found young moms and their decision-making partners to participate in the study. One of the young moms, Bre'Jaynae Joiner, also became a co-investigator on the project.

"It's incredibly valuable," Soto said. "We are doing research not just on young mothers but with young mothers. We are doing taxpayer-funded research with taxpayers."

Once they analyze the mapping data, the researchers will design potential interventions, which they hope to pilot at multiple sites in a follow-up study. They also plan to share their research results not only with the scientific community but with the public as well, such as tabling at health fairs.

"It's a perfect marriage between research, partnership and [public health](#)," Soto said.

The California Breast Cancer Research Program is one of two University of California-administered cancer research programs that taxpayers can support with voluntary contributions when they file state income taxes. These programs aim to prevent breast, lung and other cancers, and increase survival rates by funding cutting-edge research and health education such as the breastfeeding study.

"This study exemplifies how tax check-off contributions help us identify tangible solutions for elevated [breast cancer](#) risk in underserved communities," said Mhel Kavanaugh-Lynch, director of the California Breast Cancer Research Program. "Through their generous contributions, Californians are leading the way in advancing [breast cancer research](#) and increasing our arsenal of strategies to prevent the disease."

Provided by University of California

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