

# Mothers living with food insecurity less likely to breastfeed exclusively to six months

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Mothers with babies living in households with food insecurity—inadequate or unpredictable access to food because of financial issues—are less likely to breastfeed exclusively to the recommended 6 months, found a study published in *CMAJ (Canadian Medical Association Journal)*.

"We found that women who are struggling to make ends meet stop [breastfeeding](#) their [infants](#) much sooner than other women," says Dr. Valerie Tarasuk, Public Health Ontario and the University of Toronto. "We have long known that [food insecurity](#) is bad for [health](#), but this study reveals its negative impact at the very beginning of life."

Researchers looked at data on 10 450 women who participated in the Canadian Community Health Survey (between 2005 and 2014) and who had given birth a year before or within the year of their participation. Of the total, 17% lived in households with food insecurity, with 5.5% marginally food insecure, 8.6% moderately food insecure and 2.9% severely food insecure. Most women initiated breastfeeding and vitamin D supplementation (between 86% of severely food-secure to 91.6% of food-secure households), although the duration of exclusive breastfeeding varied by food-security status.

"Our findings raise serious questions about the adequacy of existing supports for mothers vulnerable to food insecurity," write the authors.

Stopping exclusive breastfeeding can be problematic because infants and

babies may miss out on the physical and emotional benefits, but formula-feeding is an additional financial burden for families.

"Given the importance of breastfeeding for health, our findings point to the need for more effective interventions to support vulnerable [women](#) and address food insecurity among Canadian families," says Dr. Tarasuk.

In a related commentary, Drs. Meta van den Heuvel and Catherine Birken, from The Hospital for Sick Children and the University of Toronto, write, "In contrast to the US, where the Women, Infants and Children program provides food supplementation to infants and children, there is no national feeding program for infants and children in Canada. When Canadian mothers who report food insecurity require nutritional supplementation for their infants, they are left to rely on local food banks to obtain formula."

The study was conducted by researchers at Public Health Ontario, the University of Toronto and Acadia University, Wolfville, Nova Scotia. It was funded by a Programmatic Grant in Health and Health Equity from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research.

"Relation between household [food insecurity](#) and breastfeeding in Canada" is published March 19, 2018.

**More information:** Sarah K. Orr et al. Relation between household food insecurity and breastfeeding in Canada, *Canadian Medical Association Journal* (2018). [DOI: 10.1503/cmaj.170880](https://doi.org/10.1503/cmaj.170880)

Meta van den Heuvel et al. Food insecurity and breastfeeding, *Canadian Medical Association Journal* (2018). [DOI: 10.1503/cmaj.180167](https://doi.org/10.1503/cmaj.180167)

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