

Here's why it's important to support your breastfeeding co-workers

July 11 2018, by Sarina Gleason



Joanne Goldbort, an assistant professor in the College of Nursing at Michigan State University, collaborated with Texas Christian University on a study that indicates support from female co-workers may be even more important to new moms who are breastfeeding than getting encouragement from their significant others, close friends and relatives. Credit: Michigan State University

Support from female co-workers may be even more important to new

moms who are breastfeeding than getting encouragement from their significant others, close friends and relatives, says a new study.

According to Michigan State University and Texas Christian University researchers, the more support women receive from their colleagues, the more successful they are in believing they can continue breastfeeding. While support from family or friends is important, surprisingly, co-worker support has a stronger effect.

The study, now published in the journal *Health Communication*, is the first to focus specifically on the effect female co-workers have on colleagues who want to continue breastfeeding by pumping milk at work.

"In order to empower women to reach their goals and to continue breastfeeding, it's critical to motivate all co-workers by offering verbal encouragement and practical help," said Joanne Goldbort, an assistant professor in the College of Nursing at MSU, who collaborated with lead author Jie Zhuang at TCU.

According to Zhuang, people may assume that women in the workplace automatically encourage one another, but that often may not be the case.

The study surveyed 500 working mothers. Eighty-one individuals indicated they had never breastfed, and 80 had stopped before returning to work. Of those who continued breastfeeding after returning to work, more than half chose not to stick with it between the first and sixth month. While the specific reasons participants stopped weren't tracked in the study, it did measure their thoughts and feelings around co-worker perception and stigma, as well as how uncomfortable they were about pumping milk at work.

Overall, the data suggested that the act of simply returning to work played a major role in their decision to quit breastfeeding but receiving

colleague support was instrumental to those who continued.

The research also showed that more than a quarter of the women who originally decided to breastfeed made the decision because their place of employment created a helpful environment, such as providing a place to pump. Around 15 percent said they chose to continue breastfeeding after returning to work because they had co-workers or supervisors who directly motivated them to do so.

Goldbort indicated that multiple variables could play into why co-worker support is viewed as equally important, if not more important, to working moms.

"One factor could be that simply spending the majority of their time during the day with co-workers necessitates more support for breastfeeding success," she said. "In the workplace, a breastfeeding woman's dependence on this is higher because she has to work collegially with co-workers, gain their support to assist with the times she's away from her desk, and ultimately try to lessen the 'you get a break and I don't' stigma."

Recently, the United States opposed the World Health Assembly's resolution to promote the use of breast milk over formula. This runs counter to years of research that shows breastfeeding has significant nutritional benefits for babies and their development. It also has many advantages for the mother. Yet the number of moms who choose to continue to breastfeed in the U.S. remains lower than health organization recommendations.

The World Health Organization and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention suggest exclusive breastfeeding for the first six to 12 months and then continuing with supplementary feeding of solid foods up to two years of age or longer.

"If women know that co-workers and supervisors will [support](#) them in their [breastfeeding](#) efforts, it can make a big difference," Goldbort said. "It really takes a village to breastfeed a baby."

Provided by Michigan State University

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