

Supportive communities can help increase breastfeeding rates for moms, new study finds

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While formula-feeding babies is a safe and convenient option, research studies have shown that natural breastfeeding is linked to numerous

health benefits for both mother and child. For mothers, breastfeeding can improve recovery after giving birth and lower the risks of cancer. For babies, the nutrients strengthen their immune system and help lower their risk of developing obesity and diabetes.

Now, a new study at the University of Missouri Sinclair School of Nursing is helping researchers better understand the factors that influence moms, particularly in [rural areas](#) where breastfeeding is less common, when deciding how to feed their babies.

"Maternal COVID vaccination and breastfeeding during a pandemic: Habitus and health behavior decision making" was published in *Public Health Nursing*.

In the study, Karry Weston, a doctoral student at the MU Sinclair School of Nursing, interviewed women in Missouri who chose to breastfeed their babies about the influences that impacted their decision-making. She learned that when these women were both educated about the health benefits of breastfeeding and also had the support of family, friends, neighbors or co-workers who also chose to breastfeed as moms, the stigma surrounding breastfeeding was reduced with increased community exposure.

"There was one woman in particular who was from a very rural area and she told me that in her community, no one breastfed since formula feeding was the cultural norm and nobody wanted to stick out like a sore thumb," Weston said. "However, once she took a leap of faith and started to breastfeed her baby, soon her friends, who were also moms, started to do it too because they felt comfortable after seeing their friend do it, so it became more normalized."

Weston, who grew up in rural Missouri herself, is currently working on a project to better understand the factors that impact mothers' decisions of

whether or not to breastfeed specifically in rural areas.

"If we can increase both education and community exposure, people can broaden their horizons, change their minds and learn about different options or different ways of doing things, which has enormous potential implications for improving health care outcomes," Weston said. "Right now my focus is on boosting [breastfeeding](#) rates given the [health benefits](#), but down the road I think studying the factors that influence [decision-making](#) can help in other areas like research on diabetes management or even exercise."

Co-authors include Linda Bullock, Albert L. Hsu, Henry Wan, Megan Burnam-Cole, Kevin D. Everett and Jane A. McElroy.

More information: Karry Weston et al, Maternal COVID vaccination and breastfeeding during a pandemic: Habitus and health behavior decision making, *Public Health Nursing* (2023). [DOI: 10.1111/phn.13221](#)

Provided by University of Missouri

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