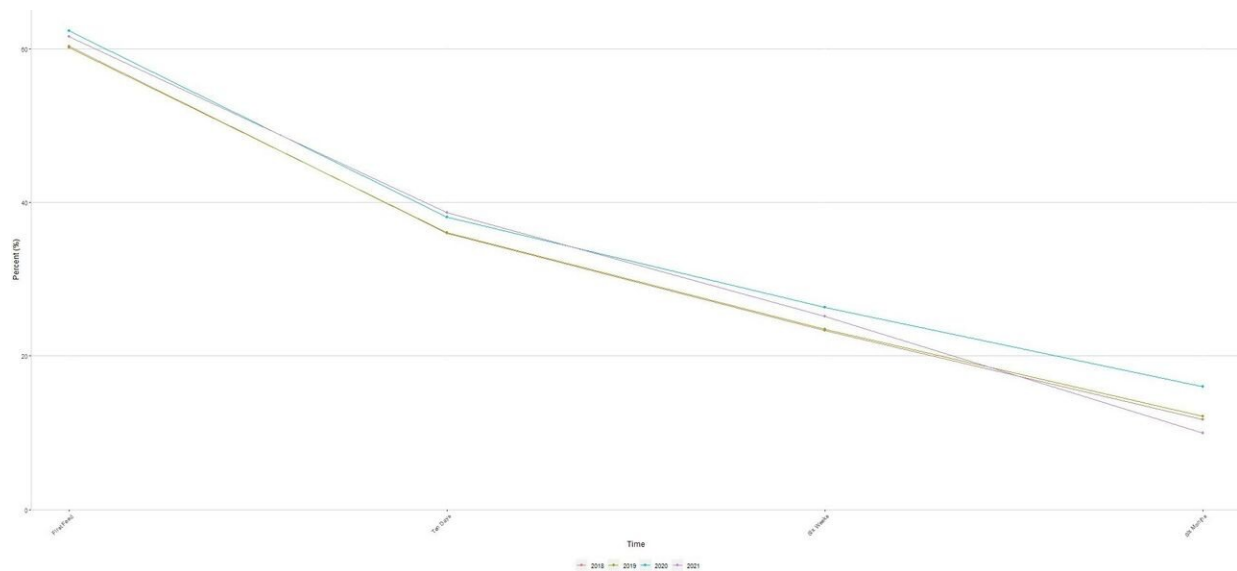


# New study shows increase in Welsh breastfeeding rates during pandemic

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Exclusive breastfeeding of babies born in Wales between 2018 and 2021. Credit: *BMJ Paediatrics Open* (2023). DOI: 10.1136/bmjpo-2023-001907

A Swansea University-led study revealed breastfeeding rates in Wales increased during the pandemic.

The research, which included all women in Wales who gave birth between 2018 and 2021, found that [breastfeeding](#) rates at six months were higher during COVID compared to the pre-pandemic period—with rates increasing from 16.6 percent before the pandemic to 20.5 percent

in 2020.

The study also found a strong correlation between a mother's intention to breastfeed and the likelihood of exclusively breastfeeding for six months.

The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of a baby's life. However, the UK has one of the lowest breastfeeding rates in the world.

To better understand this issue, Born in Wales researchers based in Swansea's National Centre for Population Health & Wellbeing Research aimed to examine the impact of the pandemic on breastfeeding uptake and duration. The team also investigated whether a mother's intention to breastfeed influenced the length of time she exclusively breastfed her baby.

Their findings have just been published online in *BMJ Paediatrics Open*. The study analyzed anonymized data from the [SAIL Databank](#), linking information from the Maternal Indicators (MIDS) dataset and the National Community Child Health (NCCH) Births and Breastfeeding dataset.

The team examined two sets of responses to explore the connection between breastfeeding intentions and duration. The first set came from the Born in Wales Survey, which asked [expectant mothers](#) about how they planned to feed their baby.

The second set, from the MIDS data, documented mothers' intentions after giving birth. By comparing responses from the two sources, the researchers could explore how a mother's intentions during pregnancy and postpartum influenced breastfeeding.

Key findings from the study include:

- Intention to breastfeed was strongly associated with a higher likelihood of exclusively breastfeeding for six months. Women who intended to breastfeed were 27.6 times more likely to continue exclusive breastfeeding to the recommended six months compared to those who did not intend to breastfeed;
- Breastfeeding rates at six months were higher during COVID compared to the pre-pandemic period. The rates increased from 16.6 percent before the pandemic to 20.5 percent in 2020; and
- Black mothers were significantly more likely to exclusively breastfeed for six months than mothers of other ethnicities.

Based on its findings, the study proposes targeted interventions during pregnancy to encourage motivation and intention to breastfeed and the development of policies and [support systems](#) to enable families to spend more time with their babies. Measures such as maternal and paternal leave can contribute to improved breastfeeding duration.

Lead author Hope Jones said, "Our research recommends that interventions promoting motivation to breastfeed during or even before pregnancy could enhance breastfeeding duration."

"Additionally, aspects of the pandemic, such as working from home or increased time with partners, may have positively influenced breastfeeding duration. Therefore, policies and practices facilitating family time can potentially improve breastfeeding duration."

Prof Sinead Brophy, Director of the Centre for Population Health, added, "Breastfeeding has significant health benefits for mothers and babies and plays a vital role in [public health](#) as it is a cost-effective way to prevent illness, reduce health care costs and promote [population health](#)."

"Our findings contribute to the growing body of evidence on breastfeeding. By understanding what influences how long mothers breastfeed their babies, we can create effective ways to encourage and support breastfeeding—improving uptake, duration of breastfeeding and maternal and child [health](#) outcomes."

**More information:** Hope Eleri Jones et al, Breastfeeding initiation and duration through the COVID-19 pandemic, a linked population-level routine data study: the Born in Wales Cohort 2018–2021, *BMJ Paediatrics Open* (2023). [DOI: 10.1136/bmjpo-2023-001907](https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjpo-2023-001907)

Provided by Swansea University

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