

Women still face barriers to breastfeed at work

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Despite the protections in place to support breastfeeding for employees, the burden still falls on working mothers to advocate for the resources they need, according to a new study from the University of Georgia.

The study also revealed gaps in the quality and accessibility of

breastfeeding resources in the eyes of working mothers.

"We know that there are benefits of breastfeeding for both the mother and the infant, and we know that returning to work is a significant challenge for breastfeeding continuation," said Rachel McCardel, a doctoral student at UGA's College of Public Health and lead study author.

"There is a collective experience that we wanted to explore and learn how can we make this better."

McCardel and her co-author specifically wanted to better understand breastfeeding support in the workplace since federal guidelines went into place over a decade ago requiring employers to provide unpaid break time and a space other than a restroom for employees to be able to express [breast milk](#).

For their study, McCardel's team surveyed [female employees](#) who performed a variety of jobs.

In addition to asking questions about their access to breastfeeding resources like private rooms, breast pumps and lactation consultants, the respondents were also asked about their experiences with combining breastfeeding and work.

They found that most respondents, nearly 80%, had a private space at work to express milk, and around two-thirds of the women reported having break times to breastfeed. Access to other resources like lactation consultants or breast pumps was less common.

Many respondents also said they hadn't expected to get much help from their employers, and there was a general lack of communication about the resources available to them.

That's a small fix that employers could implement today, said Heather Padilla, an assistant professor at the College of Public Health and study co-author.

"Designate a person who is responsible for making sure that women who are preparing for the birth of their baby understand what resources they have available to them when they return to work," she said. This could be a supervisor, an HR director or a mentor, she added.

Care and support for employees should extend to [breastfeeding](#) support, said McCardel.

"According to the most recent Workplace Health in America Survey, we're now seeing about 46% of worksites are offering some sort of [health](#) promotion programming, but only 8% offer lactation resources," she said. "I feel like that's a missed opportunity because it's a crucial part of work-life balance, especially for new mothers."

Padilla said, "Employers who want to keep valued employees should think about how to create a workplace that considers the challenges that working [mothers](#) face."

"Many women who have young children are in the workforce, and we should be able to make it easier for them to combine those two things," said Padilla. "It shouldn't be a choice of one or the other."

The study published in the latest issue of *Workplace Health & Safety*.

More information: Rachel E. McCardel et al, Assessing Workplace Breastfeeding Support Among Working Mothers in the United States, *Workplace Health & Safety* (2020). [DOI: 10.1177/2165079919890358](https://doi.org/10.1177/2165079919890358)

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