

Is COVID-19 taking babies off the breast? The implications of COVID-19 on breastfeeding rates

J. Veinot, C. Morley. Nutrition and Dietetics, Acadia University, Wolfville, NS

Introduction: Access to breastfeeding support programs is positively associated with the duration of exclusive breastfeeding. During the COVID-19 pandemic, access has decreased to many lactation support programs.

Objective: The objective was to determine, how if at all, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected breastfeeding rates.

Methods: Peer-reviewed and grey-literature resources were identified using the search terms lactation, breastfeeding and COVID-19, and breastfeeding support-programs. Eight relevant sources were found in the journals *Pediatrics*, *Maternal & Child Nutrition*, *Academy of Breastfeeding Medicine*, and *Journal of Human Lactation*. The review included grey-literature publications related to breastfeeding incidence and duration, reason why individuals stop breastfeeding, and specifically during the COVID-19 pandemic (defined as 04/01/20 - 04/01/21). An annotated bibliography of key resources and synthesis of findings were developed.

Results: There is limited research on whether this is impacting the decision to continue breastfeeding throughout the recommended period. Findings were that breastfeeding mothers reported a lack of breastfeeding programs during the COVID-19 pandemic and were unable to access these programs. A majority of mothers who ceased exclusive breastfeeding before six months reported not being ready to stop. Reasons given for breastfeeding cessation were misinformation about safety of lactation during COVID-19 and a lack of access to professional support. Mothers of low socioeconomic status reported higher rates of breastfeeding cessation due to the lack of support.

Conclusions: A lack of breastfeeding support programs during the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in increased rates of self-reported premature cessation of breastfeeding.

Significance: As breastfeeding rates are declining during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in those of lower incomes, these finding are important for public health services planning immediate lactation and breastfeeding services to support infant health.