



The Royal College of Midwives
15 Mansfield Street, London, W1G 9NH

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Call for Evidence: Halting the rise in Type 2 Diabetes in under 5 years

The Royal College of Midwives (RCM) is the professional organisation and trade union that represents the vast majority of practising midwives in the UK. The RCM is the voice of midwifery, providing excellence in professional leadership, representation, education and influence for and on behalf of midwives, student midwives and maternity support workers.

The RCM welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation, as the significance of infant nutrition on future health and wellbeing cannot be overstated. Midwives and maternity staff support women to make healthy and informed choices to improve their own health and for the wellbeing of their baby. Pregnancy is an ideal time to promote health messages, with the incentive of a new baby being a very strong motivation to make positive change.

Key Messages

- There is sound evidence that shows the protective effects of breastfeeding against diabetes, for both mothers and babies.
- The RCM calls for all maternity units to be appropriately staffed and sufficient investment to be made in postnatal care to enable women to get the support they need to breastfeed, if that is their choice.
- Breastfeeding mothers should feel supported and respected by wider society; providers of services, facilities or premises that are open to the public have a responsibility to ensure that women are able to breastfeed in public places.
- UK-wide infant feeding surveys (which were discontinued in 2015) should be reinstated, in order to ensure robust monitoring and to inform commissioning strategies.
- There needs to be increased awareness and uptake of the Healthy Start Scheme and other initiatives that promote healthy eating choices and relieve food poverty.
- The RCM, as a professional organisation and trade union, is well aware of the pressure on new mothers in the workplace. We will continue to campaign for health and safety and equality law compliance. This includes our support for flexible working arrangements, where appropriate.

Background

Evidence conclusively supports the positive impact of breastfeeding on mothers' risk of developing diabetes, and yet breastfeeding rates across the United Kingdom compare unfavourably with other developed nations. Even accounting for other risk factors, such as sociodemographics, lifestyle behaviours and weight gain prior to pregnancy, breastfeeding has clearly been shown reduce the risk to mothers of developing diabetes. The duration of breastfeeding was also found to be significant and this should influence public policy on maternity and employment rights¹.

Studies also show that breastfeeding can prevent the development of diabetes, both types 1 and 2 by offering babies protection against being overweight in later life through its bioactive substances². Several different hormones are involved in the regulation of food intake and energy balance and the complex metabolic changes that take place as a result of breastfeeding will impact on the long term tendency to obesity³.

The RCM has gathered plenty of evidence which demonstrates that breastfeeding is more likely to be successful if mothers receive timely, consistent and high quality support. Our own research found that this is not always the case, mainly as a result of the pressures on staffing and resources at maternity units and in the community.

Sadly, there is still stigma around breastfeeding in public places and while it is illegal to ask a breastfeeding woman to leave a public place, a poll conducted by Public Health England Start4Life showed that a third of women are shy about breastfeeding in public and 21% of those polled feel that other people do not want them to breastfeed in public⁴. This is hugely undermining and the RCM would rather see businesses' initiatives that welcome breastfeeding mothers and more positive messaging around women's bodies, generally.

The RCM regularly takes the temperature of the UK's maternity services with a detailed annual survey of Heads of Midwifery⁵. Reductions to elements of standard maternity services were reported by 7% of respondents and these reductions were in midwife led units, breastfeeding support, parent craft and postnatal settings. Breastfeeding is the most natural way to feed a baby, but it is not always easy and requires a lot of support. The impact of these cuts will inevitably be felt by mothers.

The RCM has consistently campaigned for more resources to be directed into postnatal care and for funding deficits to be addressed⁶. Specialist midwives with responsibility for infant feeding must have sufficient time to carry out their roles, and be banded and paid appropriately.

Support also needs to be given to more innovative approaches, where these are found to be effective in increasing breastfeeding rates. One such example is a recent scheme which used

¹ Ying Lin, MS; Cora E. Lewis; MD, MSPH; Erica P. Gunderson, PhD, MPH, MS. 2018. Lactation Duration and Progression to Diabetes in Women Across the Childbearing Years. The 30 Year Study.

² Patrícia Feliciano Pereira; Rita de Cássia G. Alfenas; Raquel Maria A. Araújo. 2014. Does breastfeeding influence the risk of developing diabetes mellitus in children? A review of current evidence. <http://jped.elsevier.es/en-does-breastfeeding-influence-risk-developing-articulo-S0021755713001782>

³ Savino S; Liguori S; Fissore M; Oggero R. 2009. Breast milk hormones and their protective effect on obesity <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2798107/>

⁴ Public Health England. 2015. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-mothers-are-anxious-about-breastfeeding-in-public>

⁵ Royal College of Midwives. 2018. State of Maternity Services Report.

⁶ Royal College of Midwives. 2014. Pressure Points. The Case for Better Postnatal Care.

financial incentives, in the form of shopping vouchers, to try to encourage and sustain breastfeeding duration in some selected areas where prevalence had previously been low⁷.

The RCM strongly believes that with firm commitment and sufficient funding, breastfeeding rates can be improved. As the scientific evidence shows, this will significantly contribute to Tom Watson's ambition to halt the rise of Type 2 diabetes in under 5 years.

⁷ Thomas K; Strong M; Relton C. 2018. Effect of financial incentives on breastfeeding. A cluster randomised clinical trial.