

Working and Breastfeeding



Although over 70% of women in the UK begin breastfeeding their newborn babies, 9 out of 10 of those who give up in the first six months would have preferred to breastfeed for longer. While many new mums have the best intentions when they begin breastfeeding, one of the top reasons given for stopping is returning to work outside the home.

However, returning to work does not mean that you have to stop breastfeeding. You could:

- Request flexible working hours, arranged around breastfeeding
- Organise childcare close to your workplace, so that you can breastfeed during breaks as well as when you are at home
- Express breastmilk to keep up your supply, and so that someone else can feed it to your baby while you are away from him

The third solution may sometimes be a challenge, and does take commitment and preparation. However, with the support of your employer, using an efficient breast pump and having a proper storage area for your expressed milk, it can be done. The important thing to remember is why you started breastfeeding in the first place and keep that in mind if the going gets a little tough.

Even if you and your baby are apart for more of the time, you can still enjoy that close bond at the beginning and end of the working day, and on days when you are together. It could be a good idea to ask the person who is looking after your baby while you are at work not to feed him for an hour or so before you come home (or give him less) so that you can both look forward to sharing that bond straight away.

Getting Prepared

Many mothers aim to wait as long as possible before returning to paid employment, and choose either shorter workdays or fewer days per week if they can. They also delay giving milk in a bottle until just before they return to work. You may find it difficult to introduce a fully breastfed baby to a bottle. A baby who refuses a bottle will usually take milk from a cup, dropper, spoon or from a finger held nursing supplementer. Feeding in motion can help. Often a baby will not take expressed breastmilk from a bottle if the mother is nearby, but will happily do so from another caregiver in a different environment.

Invest In A Breast Pump

Most mothers find a good breast pump is important, both to keep up milk supply and to express enough breastmilk for your baby to have while you are at work. You will want to find a pump that you feel comfortable with, whether it is electric or manual. Expressing



breastmilk can take practice and at first you may find it difficult to express more than a little at a time. Many women find it helps to massage their breasts before beginning, and to have a photograph of their baby to look at while expressing. Frequency, as well as length of the pumping sessions stimulates your body to produce milk, so try not to skip a session, even if you only have a few minutes. Take care not to miss pumping while you are away from your baby as you may become overly full, and at risk of a blocked duct. If your breasts become very full, express off enough for comfort.

Stock Up

It is a good idea to start pumping and freezing your milk, in date labelled containers, about a month before returning to work. This will enable you to stock up, and also to practise using your pump, so that your breasts can get used to 'letting down' while expressing, and you can work out how long it will take you to express milk. Do this after as many daytime feeds as you can; if you express a full feed in between feeding your baby you may produce too much milk and feel uncomfortable. Breastmilk can be refrigerated or frozen in hard sided plastic or glass containers with well fitting tops. Polypropylene is the preferred plastic for breastmilk storage. You can also buy breastmilk storage bags made of food safe polyethylene that are specially designed for the freezer. Breastmilk can be stored for up to two weeks in the freezer section of a single door refrigerator, for three to four months in the freezer section of a two door refrigerator / freezer, and for up to six months in a deep freeze at a constant 0°F (-18°C).

Talk To Your Employer

In some workplaces there may be factors which could affect the health and safety of new and expectant mothers. Working conditions generally considered acceptable may no longer be so for pregnant and breastfeeding women. The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 (MHSW) include regulations that protect the health and safety of new and expectant mothers. Your employer must conduct a general risk assessment, including any specific risks to women of childbearing age who are, or in the future could be pregnant, have given birth within the last six months, or are breastfeeding. Additionally, any breach of health and safety legislation in relation to new and expectant mothers is considered automatic sex discrimination, under the Sex Discrimination Act 1975. There is no length of service qualification and the Act gives protective rights to a broad range of workers, including the self-employed, agency workers, apprentices, and voluntary workers, depending on the nature of their contract.

It is important to inform your employer in writing that you are breastfeeding (ideally before you return to work). She or he must then conduct a risk assessment specific to you, based on the initial assessment and any medical advice provided by you from your GP or other health professional. Any risks identified must be reduced or removed if possible. This may include temporarily changing your working hours or conditions so that you can continue breastfeeding, or given suitable alternative work if this is available.

Although not a legal requirement, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) recommends that it is good practice for employers to provide a private, healthy and safe environment for nursing mothers to express and store breastmilk. It is not suitable to use toilets for this purpose. Employers are legally required to provide suitable rest facilities for workers who are pregnant or breastfeeding. It may be useful for your employer to have a copy of *New and expectant mothers at work: A guide for employers*, from the HSE, if he or she does not already.

It is not yet a legal requirement for your employer to provide you with paid breaks to pump milk – although the law does allow for some protection. You could point out the benefits for an employer, such as reduced absenteeism. A study in America (Cohen et al 1995) showed that one-day maternal absences were three times more common in mothers of artificially fed babies than in mothers who breastfed.

If you feel uncomfortable, you do not have to tell your colleagues that you are expressing milk during your breaks, but your line manager should be informed and needs to know that it will not interfere with your work. It is a good idea to keep a spare top and breast pads at work, should you need them.



Maintain a positive attitude about going back to work so that your employer knows how much you value your job and want to be at work, but also continue to give your baby breastmilk.

Storing Expressed Breastmilk

It is important to store your breastmilk in a place that is sanitary and safe. If there is a refrigerator available at work, store your milk there, but be sure you label it with your name or keep it in a bag so it is not mistaken for cows milk. Cool bags with ice are an alternative. Breastmilk can be stored in a refrigerator (4-10°C) for up to 72 hours, and in a refrigerator (0-4°C) for up to 8 days.

Useful Reading:

- *A guide for new and expectant mothers who work*
www.hse.gov.uk/mothers
- *New and expectant mothers at work - A guide for health professionals*
www.hse.gov.uk/mothers
- *New and expectant mothers at work - A guide for employers*
www.hsebooks.com
- *Breastfeeding and work - Information for employees and employers*
www.breastfeeding.nhs.uk

This information is available to download as a pdf from:
www.lansinoh.co.uk