

Public Health Association of New Zealand Media release

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Literature Review identifies the barriers to breastfeeding for Māori and Pacific mothers in New Zealand.

A recent review reveals our breastfeeding rates do not meet the national targets set by the Ministry of Health in 2000. The breastfeeding rates particularly for Māori and Pacific are well below the rates for non Māori and non Pacific mothers from six weeks to six months. Due to a number of contributing factors, Māori and Pacific mothers are less likely to breastfeed their babies.

The study's author Nirmala Nand, a Nutritionist and Health Promoter for the Mid Central District Health Board, told the Public Health Association's annual conference in Ngaruawahia today that this was a major public health concern which needed more sustained and ongoing commitment by all stakeholders to increase breastfeeding in Māori and Pacific populations.

"We need to work with Māori and Pacific communities to increase their understanding of the benefits of breast feeding," Ms Nand said.

"Breastfeeding is important because breast milk is the most nutritious and ideal food a newborn baby can have. Mother's milk has all the nutrients in the right quantities for the infant and uniquely has the anti-bodies which is essential to protect the infant from illness. Exclusive breastfeeding is recommended for infants up to six months of age and then up to 1 - 2 years, complemented with other foods.

"Research tells us that breastfed babies are less likely to be sick, have lower incidence of infections, diarrhoea, asthma, and infant mortality, face lower risk of developing diabetes, childhood and adult obesity and have reduced risk of developing cardiovascular diseases later in life. It helps with the special bonding between the mother and the child, leading to a more contented and happy child and therefore a less stressed mother.

"Apart from the health benefits breast-feeding is so much easier for mothers. The milk is always ready, at the right temperature, hygienic and economical."

Ministry of Health data (2006) shows that only about 66% of the general population breastfeed their newborns with this figure reducing to 55% at three months and just 25% at six months. While 59% of Māori mothers breast feed their newborns, dropping to 45% at 3 months and down to 17% still breast-feeding at six months. At the same time 57% of Pacific mothers breast feed their newborns, 48% at 3 months, with 19% still breast-feeding at six months. There are several other studies done by various researchers and the general trend appears that breastfeeding rates are not improving for New Zealand mothers including Māori and Pacific populations and the national targets are not met.

"A number of factors that influence the low rates of breast feeding amongst Māori and Pacific populations have been identified and confirmed in my literature review. For example, mothers who do not attend ante-natal classes and therefore don't get good information about the benefits of breast-feeding are less likely to start breastfeeding or continue for longer periods," Ms Nand said.

"The perception of many mothers that they don't have enough milk also leads them to introduce formula milk. As soon as the bottle is introduced to the baby, (because it is easier to suck) they lose interest in the breast, and as a result the mother may produce less milk. Introducing baby to solid foods before six months has the same impact. One must remember that the more the baby sucks the breast, the more milk will be produced. However, the mother must eat well and take lots of fluids herself.

"A lot of Māori and Pacific mothers also smoke. The anti-smoking messages have got through to them, and because some of them cannot stop smoking they tend to stop breast feeding. Lack of family support is also shown to influence mothers in making a positive decision to breastfeed.

“Sometimes fathers don’t encourage breast-feeding because they don’t like seeing it done in public. Breast feeding facilities also need to be in an appropriate place. For cultural reasons Māori and Pacific mothers are not comfortable breastfeeding near a toilet.

“Mothers who really need to go back to work early also stop breastfeeding as many workplaces do not provide facilities for breastfeeding mums.

“Employers should be looking at how they can support mothers to breastfeed. This will not only be helpful for the mothers but also the employers, because that will produce an employee who is happy and relaxed mother with a healthier baby, therefore taking less time off work.

“Overall breastfeeding makes a lot of sense, as it is highly economical for everyone including the government. Breastfeeding also helps mothers to lose extra weight and regain their figure faster as well.”

Nirmala Nand also added that it is very important that mothers are eating well and taking lots of fluids while they breast feed their infants and they should try to breastfeed for as long as possible. This is supported by the National Breastfeeding Association and the Ministry of Health.

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