
Breastfeeding and work

Summary

- Many women successfully combine breastfeeding and paid work.
 - Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission laws say that an employer must make reasonable efforts to meet the needs of an employee who is a breastfeeding mother.
 - Discuss your breastfeeding requirements with your employer, ideally before you go on maternity leave.
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Many women successfully combine breastfeeding and paid work. You need support from your employer, colleagues and family, and some flexibility in your working arrangements.

If you wish to continue breastfeeding after you return to paid work, you are legally entitled to support from your employer. Victorian law says that employers must 'reasonably accommodate' employees who wish to continue breastfeeding.

Work-related obstacles to breastfeeding

Some of the work-related obstacles to breastfeeding include:

- Early return to work – one study found that mothers who intended to return to work within six weeks of giving birth were less likely to start breastfeeding in the first place
- Insufficient paid maternity leave – only about one quarter of Australian workplaces offer paid maternity leave, with eight weeks being the average period of paid leave. Women are entitled, by law, to 52 weeks of unpaid maternity leave
- Inadequate facilities in the workplace – for example, lack of privacy or no access to a fridge
- No lactation breaks – a mother needs breaks to express milk or go to feed her baby.

Combining breastfeeding and work

If you would like to continue breastfeeding after you return to work:

- Ask your work supervisor, the equal employment opportunities officer, human resources manager or your union about your workplace's breastfeeding policies. Try to do this before you go on maternity leave.
- Discuss with your employer your intention to continue breastfeeding, ideally before you go on maternity leave.
- If you cannot go to your baby for feeds during working hours, decide how often you will need to express milk. The number of times per day will depend on the age and needs of your baby. If unsure, speak with your doctor, maternal and child health nurse, lactation consultant or Australian Breastfeeding Association counsellor.
- To express breastmilk at work, you will need a clean, private area (not a toilet), access to a fridge to store the milk, an area to store your manual or electric pump (if you use one) and regular opportunities for breaks.
- Choose an appropriate method. Breastmilk can be expressed by hand or with a manual or electric breast pump. An electric pump with a double pumping kit is the fastest, which could make it the best choice for use at work.
- Consider buying or hiring an electric pump. Speak with a lactation consultant or the Australian Breastfeeding Association for information and advice on the best choice of breast pump for you.
- Look for child care or a babysitter close to your work (rather than close to your home). That way, you may be able to visit the childcare centre during breaks to breastfeed your baby or else have the babysitter bring your baby to your workplace. Discuss these options with your employer and the baby's carer.
- Be flexible and aim to negotiate a fair trade-off with your employer.

Expressed breastmilk – safety

Breastmilk must be stored correctly to keep it free from germs, which can make your baby ill. Safety suggestions include:

- Use clean hands and clean equipment.
- Express into clean containers. These may be glass or plastic containers or sealable plastic bags.
- Label each container with the time and date the breastmilk was expressed.
- Refrigerate the breastmilk within one hour of expressing.
- Freeze excess breastmilk.
- Keep the milk cold on the commute home. For example, pack the milk in an esky with a freezer brick.
- Don't use a microwave to thaw or reheat breastmilk. Thaw or warm it by putting the bottle or bag in a container of hot water. Then test the milk on the side of your wrist – it should feel about the same temperature as your skin.

Discrimination laws and breastfeeding

It is illegal for an employer to discriminate against you (treat you differently or unfairly) because you are breastfeeding or expressing. Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission laws (2010) say that an employer must make reasonable efforts to accommodate the needs of an employee who is a breastfeeding mother.

Try to negotiate a reasonable agreement first, but if your employer makes it difficult for you to continue breastfeeding, speak to your union representative or contact the Australian Breastfeeding Association for advice.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Maternal and child health nurse
- Maternal and Child Health Line (24 hours) Tel. 132 229
- Australian Breastfeeding Association Breastfeeding Helpline Tel. 1800 686 268
- Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission Enquiry Line Tel. 1300 292 153 or (03) 9032 3583

Things to remember

- Many women successfully combine breastfeeding and paid work.
- Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission laws say that an employer must make reasonable efforts to meet the needs of an employee who is a breastfeeding mother.
- Discuss your breastfeeding requirements with your employer, ideally before you go on maternity leave.

This page has been produced in consultation with and approved by:

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