

Breastfeeding changes in the last half century: Oh, what a difference!  
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Nationwide, about 79 percent of women leave the hospital breastfeeding their infants. In Washington, the number is even higher at 92 percent. However, in the early 1970s, breast-feeding reached an all-time low, and only 22 percent of women left the hospital nursing their infants at that time.

The decline in breastfeeding during the 1960s and '70s was due to a variety of socio-cultural factors, including emphasis on motherhood as a science, increasing medical interventions, increased safety of premixed infant formulas and mothers joining the workforce. The tides again turned in the late 1970s, however, with support from groups like the La Leche League, and breastfeeding again became a preferred method of infant feeding. Further, recently enacted laws have provided more time and space for working mothers to pump breastmilk for their infants.

Despite current efforts, there remains a generation of women who may not have received skills or reliable information about infant feeding. As these women's daughters and granddaughters are now having children, a generation gap about breastfeeding knowledge leaves many women at a loss as to how to better support their breastfeeding progeny.

Infant feeding information has changed a great deal since the 1970s!

Not many years ago, newborns were immediately whisked away to the nursery to allow mom "time for rest." They were swaddled tightly and kept relatively isolated in the nursery, where they were immediately given pacifiers and sips of water or sugar water to ensure that newborns could swallow safely (breastmilk is safest!). Mothers were encouraged to schedule feedings, and the feedings were timed, under the assumption that this would ensure adequate intake – despite infant cries.

Infants often received solid foods earlier than is currently recommended, sometimes within the first two to three months. Additionally, breast pumps were mediocre at best, and mothers were provided with little time to retrieve milk to nourish their infants. The improvements in and increased safety of infant formulas also allowed many physicians to recommend formula as an equivalent to breastfeeding. While artificial baby milk products available in the U.S. are currently regarded as quite safe, assuredly, these products are very different from breast milk in the afforded to both mother and baby.

Healthcare providers are continually developing strategies that have proven benefit in supporting and promoting breastfeeding. If you know or support a new mom, below are some ideas which encourage a great start in life.

1. Allow mom time with her baby to "skin-to-skin" for several hours after birth (there will be plenty of time to hold and love baby in the future). This time is critical as it allows baby and mom to get to know each other (bond), also allowing for a more natural introduction to breastfeeding and to life. Be patient about knowing baby's weight or length. Mom and baby's together-time cannot be measured.
2. Breastfeeding is learned and takes time. Provide the new mom with help for *other* chores, like laundry and food preparation.
3. Avoid the temptation to give advice. Sometimes new moms just need someone to listen.
4. Avoid giving artificial nipples, such as pacifiers or bottles (even with breastmilk), to breastfeeding infants in the early weeks. Mom's milk supply benefits from suckling by and encourages even more milk production. Meanwhile, baby is spared expending excess energy.

Even though everyone wants to hold and feed baby, there are many more jobs which are equally important.

5. Focus on mom! She needs to know that learning to nurse takes time. Pamper her! Avoid offering to feed baby at night “so mom can rest.” Even small amounts of formula fed to baby can decrease mom’s milk production and formulas are currently thought to promote allergic reactions in susceptible infants.
6. Feed baby on cue. Don’t wait until baby cries, which is the *last* cue. Watch for early cues: bringing their hands to center or smacking their lips or turning their heads searching for the breast. While it may be tempting to hand a fussy baby to a nursing mom and tell her “it’s time to feed the baby,” it is more beneficial to calm the baby *before* the feeding. Also, understand that babies have growth periods and may spend a few days every few weeks eating all day. This is expected and healthy.
7. Compliment mom on how proud you are of how she is doing what is best for her baby. Help her to get help if she hits a “bump in the road”, such as nipple pain or concerns about baby’s weight gain.