Breastfeeding Among Minnesota WIC Participants During COVID-19

Minnesota WIC is tracking breastfeeding rates monthly for our participants* to monitor the effects of the COVID-19 crisis on breastfeeding. Medical professionals strongly support breastfeeding during the pandemic to provide optimal nutrition and protective immune factors found in human milk. Changes in hospital and clinic services in response to the virus have created new challenges to initiating and sustaining breastfeeding. Reduced labor and lactation support in the hospital, early discharge (within 24 hours of birth), and fewer resources post-discharge are negatively impacting breastfeeding rates. Those who work in low-paying service sectors, who are disproportionately women of color and immigrants, have borne the brunt of the economic impact of the pandemic. The Minnesota WIC Program (https://www.health.state.mn.us/people/wic/index.html) continues to provide breastfeeding support to parents across Minnesota and encourages families with infants to turn to WIC for help.

Breastfeeding initiation and duration

Due to concerns about parent-to-child transmission of COVID-19, some infants and mothers have been unnecessarily separated immediately after birth. This interferes with the establishment of breastfeeding. In addition, there has been a reduced commitment to lactation support in some birthing facilities. Some families are being discharged early and, after discharge, many communities have fewer options for breastfeeding help. These challenges, along with added social and economic stresses, may explain the decline in breastfeeding initiation and increase in early weaning since early 2020.

The first confirmed case of COVID-19 in Minnesota occurred on March 6, 2020. Schools were closed March 15, bars and restaurants March 16. George Floyd was killed on May 25, 2020.
The percentage of infants receiving formula during their hospital stay initially declined during the crisis, despite an increase in the number of fully formula-fed infants. More recently, formula feeding has been increasing and is now more common than before COVID. Early on, many families were discharged early. Most supplementation occurs on the second day, when babies become more alert and seem to want to nurse “non-stop.” This can cause concerns about milk supply that lead to unnecessary use of formula, especially when lactation support is not available.

Breastfeeding initiation rates by race, ethnicity and cultural identity, 2020 - 2021

From the first quarter of 2020 to the 3rd quarter of 2021, initiation rates declined among all cultural groups, most steeply for Asian (9.3 percentage points), American Indian (7.1 points), African American (6.3 points), and White (4.3 points) families.

East African (0.6 points) and Hmong (0.8 points) WIC participants have had the smallest losses during this time period. The Hmong Breastfeeding Coalition hosts Facebook Live events and in January 2020 rolled out a series of culturally-specific breastfeeding education videos. The Minnesota Indigenous Breastfeeding Coalition also offers online support to community members.
Breastfeeding initiation in Minnesota by WIC participation

During the hospital stay, many families don’t get support grounded in their history and culture. This can impact their breastfeeding success. Once families leave the hospital, they don’t have the usual sources of support, such as visits from family or friends, breastfeeding support groups, or outpatient lactation care. Families may not be able to weigh their infant, or bring their baby to WIC to be weighed, which increases anxiety about weight gain and milk supply. These factors can lead to early weaning. WIC encourages families to enroll their infants soon after hospital discharge, as WIC can help with breastfeeding. Many WIC agencies provide peer counseling services to pregnant and breastfeeding women. As other resources have become unavailable due to the pandemic, WIC continues to offer telephone counseling and support to new parents.
Resources


- Minnesota WIC program (https://www.health.state.mn.us/people/wic/index.html)