

WIC Breastfeeding Support: How front-line staff promote breastfeeding

UPDATED MAY 2025

Planning

This training is discussion based. Set aside time with your supervisor and other front-line staff (if any). If your supervisor is not from WIC, include a WIC representative in your discussion. Use the information below to discuss how best to support breastfeeding, how your role can promote and support breastfeeding, and how refer questions to WIC staff.

Breastfeeding support: How you improve the health of mothers and children

All WIC staff are important in promoting and supporting breastfeeding. Front line staff who answer the phones or greet WIC participants when they arrive at clinic help set the tone for participants' experience in WIC and can influence attitudes about breastfeeding.

- Watch the [WIC Breastfeeding Support](#) video (USDA).

How can front line staff support breastfeeding?

- **Look around the waiting area. Does your space communicate support for breastfeeding?** Posters can be ordered from WIC. Ensure there is no formula or anything with formula company logos in the waiting area. That includes magazines and other printed materials. Also, do not exhibit sign-ups for “baby clubs” or similar tear offs, as these often generate free formula or formula ads. Signs for Baby Café’s and similar support groups are fine. If you have suggestions for adding posters or removing materials, share them with the WIC Breastfeeding Coordinator and/or WIC coordinator, or your supervisor, as appropriate.
- **Is there a sign that women are welcome to breastfeed, but if they would prefer a more private area, they can ask the staff?** Do you know where a WIC participant can breastfeed if they request a more private area? If not, please discuss with your supervisor.

Ideas:

- Signs can be downloaded from the [Minnesota WIC Website](#).
- Space for women to breastfeed if they request a more private area varies with your space. Here are places used by some clinics:
 - Private area where WIC staff work with breastfeeding women
 - WIC office not being used for a certification

WIC BREASTFEEDING SUPPORT: HOW FRONT-LINE STAFF PROMOTE BREASTFEEDING

- Room used for pumping
- Conference room – add a door sign asking for privacy
- Your creative idea here: _____
- **Be a cheerleader.** “It’s great that you are breastfeeding!” “What a great gift you are giving your baby by breastfeeding.” Or similar praise. Use your own words.
- **Is the parent asking for formula? Did they say they just quit breastfeeding?** How do you respond to those questions?

Let the mother know that her request or issue is important, and you will refer her concern on to the person who can help her. Ideas for talking with a parent or a family member about the request or concern:

- “Thanks for letting me know. (Name of CPA, or more generally, one of the nutrition staff) will be happy to discuss that with you.”
- **If your supervisor feels it is appropriate** you might ask “Please tell me about why you are asking about formula today” or “Please tell me more about why you are stopping breastfeeding.” You can then communicate this information to the CPA you are referring the participant on to.
- Discuss with others at WIC how requests for formula should be handled. In larger agencies there may be someone who can immediately (or in a short time) discuss the request. In smaller agencies, where staff wear many hats, WIC staff may need to contact the participant later.
- Discuss the process. Remember that front line staff never issue formula or promise that formula will be provided. If appropriate, and the parent has shared her concerns, you could say something like “that must be frustrating,” or “I see that you are concerned.”
- **Reflect on questions you ask as you gather information when creating a WIC record.** How do questions you ask potentially affect breastfeeding? ***We recommend that you do not ask, “Are you breastfeeding or formula feeding?” as this can imply that the two are equal.***
 - We know that over 90% of women in Minnesota initiate breastfeeding, so there is a good chance that she is breastfeeding.

MN WIC staff shared these alternatives:

- “How are you currently feeding your baby?”
- “Please tell me about how you are feeding your baby.”
- “How is breastfeeding going?”
- **Someone complains about a woman who is breastfeeding in the waiting area.** This doesn’t happen often. Has it happened while you were working? If so, how was it handled?

WIC BREASTFEEDING SUPPORT: HOW FRONT-LINE STAFF PROMOTE BREASTFEEDING

- If someone does complain, you could say something like: “I’m sorry you feel that way. There is a state law that states women may breastfeed anywhere. If you would be more comfortable in another sitting area, I can show you that area.”
- Discuss with your supervisor where someone could sit if they are concerned about a woman breastfeeding in the waiting area. A copy of [the Minnesota Law](#) can be downloaded and printed. You could keep these cards at the front desk.

Why WIC promotes breastfeeding

Human milk is made for human babies. The close contact provided during breastfeeding is also important for baby and for the mother.

In addition to nutrition, breastmilk helps protect baby from getting sick. And surprisingly, breastfeeding can also help the breastfed infant and children with health later in life. The USDA [Breastfeeding Benefits](#) website summarizes why breastfeeding is important.

The differences between breastmilk and artificial milk, also called formula is highlighted on the poster below.



The blocks showing important components of breastmilk should be stacked even higher! Researchers estimate that there are “many hundreds to thousands of distinct bioactive molecules that protect against infection and inflammation and contribute to immune maturation, organ development, and healthy microbial colonization.”¹ That means that breastmilk helps protect against illness in several ways - it helps develop the gastrointestinal tract and helps establish a beneficial “microbiome”. That is a term you will likely hear more about, as we are just starting to understand how important the microbiome is for health.

Breastfeeding is important for the mother’s health, too. Did you know that when women breastfeed, they reduce their risk of some cancers and heart disease, and may even reduce the risk of type 2 diabetes?

Risk reduction doesn’t mean that someone will never get those diseases. It does mean that they are less likely to get those diseases if they breastfeed or if they were breastfed.

Referring breastfeeding participants

While it is not your role to offer nutrition and breastfeeding advice, it is important that you are a cheerleader for breastfeeding and that you offer positive words of encouragement or understanding if you are the person that a WIC participant shares their breastfeeding concerns with.

For example, if a participant says she's thinking of stopping breastfeeding because it is painful, you could say, "That must be tough. It's great that you are breastfeeding. I can refer you to one of our WIC staff to discuss the pain with you. Other women have found talking with the WIC nutrition staff helpful" or something similar.

Staffing is different in each WIC agency so this is another topic to discuss with your supervisor to determine how participants with concerns should be referred.

Additional reading

[Breastfeeding](#) (World Health Organization)

Resources

1. Ballard, et al. [Human Milk Composition: Nutrients and Bioactive Factors](#). *Pediatr Clin North Am*. 2013 Feb; 60(1): 49-74.

Reference- complete listing of hyperlinks:

[WIC Breastfeeding Support](https://wicbreastfeeding.fns.usda.gov/) (<https://wicbreastfeeding.fns.usda.gov/>)

[Minnesota WIC Website](#)

(<https://www.health.state.mn.us/people/wic/localagency/bf/index.html#materials>)

[the Minnesota Law](#)

(<https://www.health.state.mn.us/docs/people/wic/localagency/bf/statutes.pdf>)

[Breastfeeding Benefits](#) (<https://wicbreastfeeding.fns.usda.gov/breastfeeding-benefits>)

[Breastfeeding](#) (https://www.who.int/health-topics/breastfeeding#tab=tab_1)

[Human Milk Composition: Nutrients and Bioactive Factors](#)

(<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC3586783/>)

Minnesota Department of Health - WIC Program, 625 Robert St N, PO BOX 64975, ST PAUL MN 55164-0975; 1-800-657-3942, health.wic@state.mn.us, www.health.state.mn.us; to obtain this information in a different format, call: 1-800-657-3942.

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