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## WORLD BREASTFEEDING WEEK: A STEP IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

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08.18.10 - 01:29 pm



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The first week of August was World Breastfeeding Week. Gov. Beverly Perdue also proclaimed it breastfeeding week in North Carolina. There were gatherings, breast-feed-ins and lots of literature distributed. Breastfeeding is proven to improve immunity and reduce obesity, diabetes, asthma and SIDS in children. It also is shown to reduce the chance of breast cancer, ovarian cancer and osteoporosis for women who breastfeed. It's inexpensive, sanitary, always the right temperature and is completely portable.

You would think with so much positive evidence indicating that "breast is best" that it would be happening a majority of the time. But it's not. While about 74 percent attempt to breastfeed early on, only about 43 percent of children are breastfed at six months and only 23 percent were breastfed at 12 months. This, despite the American Academy of Pediatrics recommending breast milk for the first 12 months of life. The World Health Organization recommends two years. There is a significant disparity between the breastfeeding rates of white and African-American women, who breastfeed at a much lower rate. Some believe this may contribute to the higher infant mortality rate in the African-American community.

But before you go rushing to judgment about moms who don't breastfeed or those that give up after a short time, consider this: breastfeeding moms face many challenges and social barriers to breastfeeding. Many mothers report that the practice of breastfeeding is still not normalized in our society. Mothers often feel self-conscious. Sometimes they may get jeers or stares in public. Some women have been asked to stop breastfeeding or to go someplace else. In our ultra-sexualized society, some people have a hard time separating a woman's breasts between sexual objects, and something that offers nutrition. For other women, balancing work and breastfeeding is challenging.

Duke employee Marcy Boynton is a working mom to 7-month-old Lilly. So far, she has managed to breastfeed and pump at work. But she reflected on how her situation might be different.

"I think that one of the biggest challenges for breastfeeding moms is when they have to deal with ignorance or a lack of support from their partners, family members, co-workers, bosses, etc. I have been really blessed with a great deal of

support, although I still contend with the occasional rude comment and frequently not being able to find a safe and clean place to nurse my child. Some of the biggest challenges breastfeeding mothers face are how to deal with structural barriers that can seriously affect their ability to nurse and pump. For example, a close friend of mine works in an office with glass walls. That might be nice from an aesthetic perspective, but not really conducive for pumping at work. I am really lucky to have an office with a door that locks, as well as a very understanding female office mate. I often wonder what I would do if I still worked at the job I had in high school, which was as a grocery store clerk. I seriously doubt that I would have the time or privacy to pump milk."

Unfortunately, breastfeeding skills are not in-born. A breastfeeding mother first has to learn how to nurse her child and her child needs to learn how to breastfeed. It's a learned process between mother and baby. At times, it can be frustrating. Moms need lots of social and culturally sensitive support to initiate and continue breastfeeding. This is why World Breastfeeding Week is such a great thing. It opens the door to a conversation. Durham Connects tackles breastfeeding during its nurse home visits.

"Sometimes we catch mothers in the crossroads between continued nursing and weaning due to a resolvable breastfeeding problem, and we can offer suggestions or refer along to another professional," said Durham Connects nurse and new mom to baby Daphne, Debbie Farb. "Unfortunately, many moms have already switched to formula by the time Durham Connects nurses meet them. Many moms wean in the first week or two, while Durham Connects visits around three weeks postpartum."

Many mothers find that once they've overcome the physical barriers, the result is a beautiful bond between mother and child. Another reason breastfeeding is challenging is how it is viewed and supported by society and by our public policies. Currently there are few protections for breastfeeding mothers. It is legal for a mother to breastfeed in public, and the new health care bill made big strides by stating that employers must provide a clean space and time for a working mother to feed or pump while at work.

Boynton said, "I try not to put too much pressure on myself to hit a particular time minimum for breastfeeding. I know so many women who have been unable to continue breastfeeding, due to a number of reasons, and who have felt a great deal of guilt about that fact. My feeling is that we should offer support to all mothers, no matter the means they use to nourish their child."

Experts agree that breastfeeding not only benefits mom and baby, it benefits society as a whole by reducing chronic illness, sick time at work and improving overall productivity of citizens.

Farb said, "It's always most important to meet the mother and family where they are. As a Durham Connects nurse, I inquire about moms' personal goals with breastfeeding, and offer assistance to help meet those goals. Whether mothers opt to feed their babies all breast milk, a combination of breast milk and formula, or

just formula, it is important to understand the plusses and minuses of these decisions. Friends, family, employers and society at large should find ways to support moms in whatever informed decisions they make."

Public attitudes and public policies might have a long way to go to fully support breastfeeding, but fortunately our community has many resources available to assist mothers in their efforts.

Durham Connects is a collaboration of the Durham Family Initiative, itself a partnership of the Center for Child and Family Policy at Duke University and the Center for Child and Family Health, and the Durham County Health Department. It is funded by The Duke Endowment. For information, please visit [www.durhamconnects.org](http://www.durhamconnects.org) or call (919) 668-3279.

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