

Is your workplace breastfeeding-friendly?

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Working parents need all the support they can get to keep their livelihoods on track while raising families. This is most especially true for parents with a new baby. One of the biggest challenges parents experience when getting back to full-time work is what to do about infant feeding. Unfortunately, returning to work is one of the most common reasons why new moms don't even try or give up on breastfeeding.



Breastfeeding is a crucial aspect of infant and maternal health, providing the best start in life for baby as well as numerous other benefits for both mother and child. The World Health Organisation (WHO) recommends exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of life, and ongoing breastfeeding together with the introduction of complementary foods, up to and over two years of age.

According to Dr Chantell Witten from Wits University, a spokesperson for [ADSA](#) (The Association for Dietetics in South Africa), South Africa has low exclusive breastfeeding rates to start with, and returning to work exacerbates the situation. “The latest breastfeeding rates in South Africa are from 2016, and from that data we see an acute drop off from 44% of mothers breastfeeding in the first month after birth to only 28.9% still breastfeeding at two to three months of age, which coincides with the timing for return to work.”

In efforts to reverse this trend, South Africa included the Code of Good Practice on protection of employees during pregnancy and after the birth of a child in the Basic Conditions of Employment Act. South Africa is one of only 42 countries in the world to mandate breastfeeding support in the workplace. Employers are required to allow breastfeeding employees two 30-minute breaks per day for breastfeeding or expressing milk, every working day for the first six months of their child's life.

Dr Witten says, “Despite the legislation, research shows¹ that many companies are not making provision for mothers to express breastmilk at their workplaces, and it is hard for government to enforce compliance within the private sector environments. What is also missing is that we are not hearing parents demanding these provisions to support breastfeeding in the workplace. We need to create awareness of this provision and build breastfeeding-friendly work environments that proactively reduce social stigma and instead promote breastfeeding as a vital part of wellness and healthy lifestyles.”

Mothers face barriers to breastfeeding in the workplace

Professor Lisanne du Plessis from the Division of Human Nutrition, Stellenbosch University, co-authored a 2020 research study² at businesses with more than 50 employees in the Breede Valley of the Western Cape. She says, “What we found is that breastfeeding support practices were limited and inadequate. For instance, there was a lack of common breastfeeding support practices such as onsite or nearby childcare facilities, access to breastfeeding counsellors, promotion of the benefits of breastfeeding to employees and provision of private spaces for expressing breastmilk. In addition, workplace breastfeeding policies were not common and were mostly found in the public rather than the private sector. Under half of our research sites did not provide the mandated time for expressing breastmilk at work. My sense is that this study reflects what is happening beyond the Western Cape as well, since many of the workplaces included in the study have branches in other provinces. Legislated breastfeeding break times most definitely need to be monitored to ensure better compliance with the Basic Conditions of Employment Act in South African workplaces.”

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[World Breastfeeding Week](#) is celebrated every year from 1 to 7 August. In 2023, the theme, ***'Enabling Breastfeeding, Making a difference for working parents'***, highlights that workplace challenges are the most common reasons for never breastfeeding or stopping before the recommended first six months of life.

A workplace doesn't necessarily have to be hostile towards breastfeeding to cause mothers to give up efforts to continue to breastfeed their babies. Lacking consideration for mothers who want to breastfeed their babies up until at least six months of age can easily be too much stress for most mothers. We've all heard the stories of new mothers uncomfortably trying to express breastmilk in workplace toilet cubicles or fearing co-workers walking in on them when they try to find a private space.

ADSA Registered Dietitian and International Nutrition Consultant, Andiswa Ngqaka, says, “It is important that there is recognition and appreciation in the corporate environment that breastmilk is the natural food for optimal health and growth of young children in South Africa. Therefore, breastfeeding mothers require our full support. Many parents are employed, and therefore supporting the breastfeeding goals of employees is part of employee wellness.”

Andiswa highlights strategies for creating a breastfeeding friendly workplace including:

- Complying with the South African law by providing two 30-minute breaks for breastfeeding or expressing breastmilk.
- Management support for providing a breastfeeding friendly workplace that is sensitive to the needs of breastfeeding employees.
- Formulating, communicating and enforcing a supportive workplace breastfeeding policy.
- Including breastfeeding education and promotion in general employee wellness and health initiatives.
- Providing parents with access to breastfeeding education and lactation consultations.
- Providing clean, secure and private spaces in the workplace for expressing milk and breastfeeding, which preferably includes access to a fridge for storing breastmilk expressed at work.
- Hearing parents' voices when it comes to their individual breastfeeding goals and challenges.
- Adopting a flexible approach to be as supportive of breastfeeding employees as possible, particularly during their baby's first six months of life.

¹Pereira-Kotze, C., Feeley, A., Doherty, T. *et al.* Maternity protection entitlements for non-standard workers in low-and-middle-income countries and potential implications for breastfeeding practices: a scoping review of research since 2000. *Int Breastfeed J* 18, 9 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13006-023-00542-8>

²Daniels LC, Mbenyane XG and du Plessis LM. *S Afr J Child Health* 2020;14(2):94-98. <https://doi.org/10.7196/SAJCH.2020.v14i2.1679>

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