

Introduction

Breastfeeding is one of the most effective ways to ensure child health and survival.¹ An international report on the rates of infants who were ever breastfed found that Ireland ranked the lowest out of 121 countries, with 55%.² It is important to understand women's experiences of infant feeding, including the reasons why women may choose not to breastfeed.

Aim

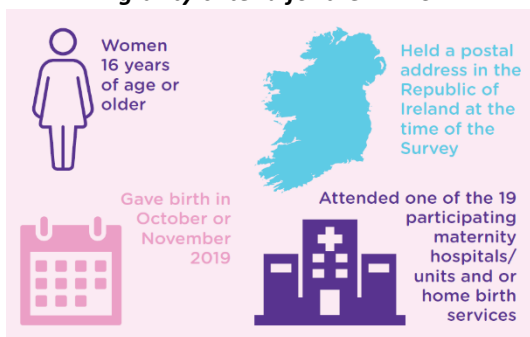
This study aimed to explore women's experiences of infant feeding in Ireland.



Methods

Secondary analysis of the National Maternity Experience Survey (NMES) 2020.³ Free-text comments that mentioned feeding were analysed using thematic analysis.

Eligibility criteria for the NMES



Results

720 women provided 824 comments that mentioned feeding. Four main themes were identified.

Themes identified from the free text comments

Support and encouragement

Some women felt very supported by healthcare professionals, while others experienced a lack of support.

Information and education on feeding

While some women received very clear information, some reported receiving contradictory advice from healthcare professionals.

Pressure and respect for personal preferences

Some women felt pressured to use a feeding method other than first preference.

Hospital environment and resources

Staffing shortages and hospital facilities impacted women's experiences.

The comments revealed that some women would have liked additional support, regardless of their chosen feeding method.

Support and Encouragement

'Midwives in the hospital [were] fantastic. Very supportive, especially with breastfeeding. Public health nurses helped to build confidence and offered support'.

Breastfeeding wasn't encouraged. In my ward there were 4 women breastfeeding. The nurses advised three of us (that I heard) to supplement with formula, including me.

Information

Mixed advice regarding feeding my baby: 1. Breastfeeding. 2. Other nurse bottle and breast. All nurses had different advice, some very pushy on breastfeeding.

More information should be given regarding the pain of breastfeeding, I think this could prepare mothers better and encourage them to keep at it.

Pressure to feed in a particular way

One midwife manager in particular made me feel ashamed that my baby wasn't gaining weight fast enough and used the threat of keeping me in hospital repeatedly at a time I felt very vulnerable.

Hospital environment and resources

Drawn curtains & closed doors are rarely respected by auxiliary staff. A simple knock or call from behind the curtain would be much appreciated.

Conclusion

While it is important not to pressure women to feed in a particular way, having adequate supports and encouraging women to commence and continue breastfeeding is essential. Providing increased postnatal supports for breastfeeding women might help to address low breastfeeding rates in Ireland.

References

1. World Health Organisation (WHO). Breastfeeding 2021. https://www.who.int/health-topics/breastfeeding#tab=tab_1.
2. Unicef. Breastfeeding. A Mothers Gift, for Every Child. Unicef; 2018.
3. National Care Experience Programme. Findings of the National Maternity Experience Survey 2020. 2020.