

# National Maternity Experience Survey

## Women's experiences of initiating feeding:

### Findings from the National Maternity Experience Survey 2020

**Róisín Murphy, Dr Daniela Rohde,**  
Dr Conor Foley, Anna Maria Verling, Tracy O'Carroll, Rachel Flynn

National Care Experience Programme, Health Information and Quality Authority



# Background

- Breastfeeding is one of the most effective ways to ensure child health and survival.<sup>1,2</sup>
- Despite the benefits associated with breastfeeding, two out of three infants worldwide are not breastfed for the recommended six months.<sup>2</sup>
- In Ireland in 2019, 63.8% of mothers initiated breastfeeding, while 37.3% exclusively breastfed at the time of discharge from hospital.<sup>3</sup>



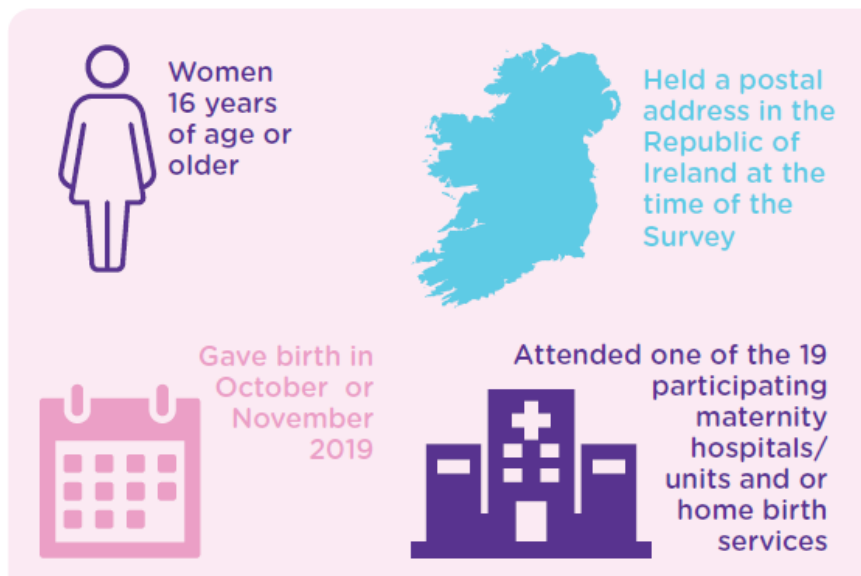
1. Breastfeeding in the 21st century: epidemiology, mechanisms, and lifelong effect. *The Lancet* 387(10017), 475-490. 10.1016/S0140-6736(15)01024-7.

2. World Health Organization, 2021. Breastfeeding [https://www.who.int/healthtopics/breastfeeding#tab=tab\\_1](https://www.who.int/healthtopics/breastfeeding#tab=tab_1)

3. A Mothers Gift, for Every Child. Unicef, pp. 11, 12, 13.

# National Maternity Experience Survey (NMES)

- 68 questions, covering experiences from antenatal care through to labour and birth, feeding, and care at home after birth.
- Women were invited to respond if they met the eligibility criteria:

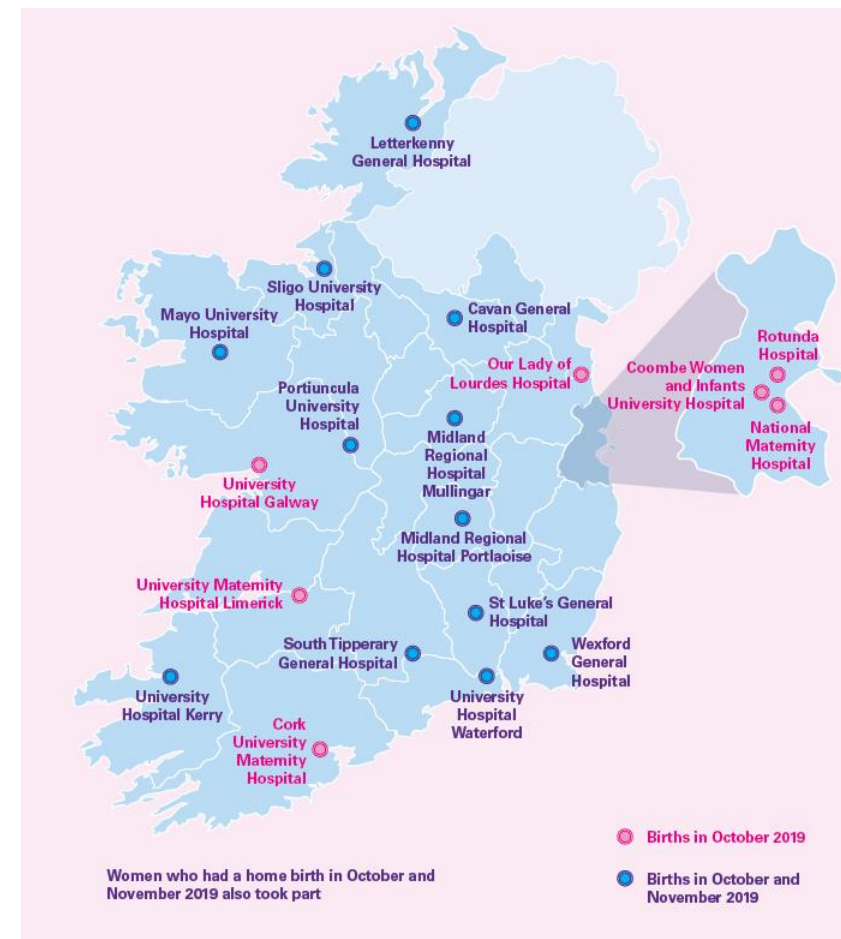


Women 16 years of age or older

Held a postal address in the Republic of Ireland at the time of the Survey

Gave birth in October or November 2019

Attended one of the 19 participating maternity hospitals/units and or home birth services



# Methods

- Mixed methods, involving secondary analysis of quantitative and qualitative NMES data<sup>5</sup>
- Free-text comments that mentioned feeding analysed using thematic analysis.<sup>6</sup>

Q61. What was particularly good about your maternity care?

Q62. Was there anything that could be improved?

Q63. Were there any other important parts of your maternity care experience that are not covered by the questions in this survey?

## Stage 5 – Feeding your baby

The following section asks about your experiences of care in terms of **feeding your baby**.

Did your health care professionals discuss with you the different options for feeding your baby? *Please tick all that apply*

- 1. Yes, during pregnancy
- 2. Yes, during labour or immediately after birth
- 3. Yes, after birth while in hospital
- 4. Yes, after birth while at home
- 5. No
- 6. I did not want or need discussion of different options
- 7. Don't know or can't remember

In the first few days after the birth, how was your baby fed? *Please tick one box only*

- 1. Breast milk (or expressed breast milk) only
- 2. Both breast and formula (bottle) milk
- 3. Formula (bottle) milk only
- 4. Don't know or can't remember

Were your decisions about how you wanted to feed your baby respected by your health care professionals?

- 1. Yes, always
- 2. Yes, sometimes
- 3. No
- 4. Don't know or can't remember

*If you had a home birth, please go to Q44.*

During your stay in hospital, did your health care professionals give you adequate support and encouragement with feeding your baby?

- 1. Yes, always
- 2. Yes, sometimes
- 3. No
- 4. I did not want or need support and encouragement
- 5. Don't know or can't remember

At home after the birth of your baby, did your health care professionals give you adequate support and encouragement with feeding your baby?

- 1. Yes, always
- 2. Yes, sometimes
- 3. No
- 4. I did not want or need support and encouragement
- 5. Don't know or can't remember

5. National Maternity Experience Survey, 2020. Findings of the National Maternity Experience Survey 2020.

6. Braun, V., Clarke, V., 2006. Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*. doi [10.1191/1478088706qp0630a](https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a).

## Survey participants

- 3,204 women (50% response rate)
- Majority (83%) White Irish
- Majority (72%) aged between 30 and 39
- 58% had at least one previous birth
- 42% were first time mothers.

Age category	N	%
Under 25	155	4.8
25-29	451	14.1
30-34	1,173	36.6
35-39	1,146	35.8
40 or older	280	8.7
Previous births		
None	1,240	42.2
One or two	1,482	50.4
Three or more	216	7.4
Ethnic group		
White Irish	2,602	82.5
Irish Traveller	11	0.3
Roma	10	0.3
Any other White background	349	11.1
African	41	1.3
Any other Black background	3	0.1
Chinese	12	0.4
Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi	37	1.2
Any other Asian background	18	0.6
Arabic	14	0.4
Mixed	30	1.0
Other	28	0.9

# Women's experiences of feeding

## Responses to closed-ended questions on feeding

Survey question		N (%)
Were your decisions about how you wanted to feed your baby respected by your healthcare professionals?	Yes, always	2,391 (74.7)
	Yes, sometimes	598 (18.7)
	No	206 (6.4)
	Don't know or can't remember	4 (0.1)
During your stay in hospital, did your healthcare professionals give you adequate support and encouragement with feeding your baby?	Yes, always	1,640 (52.8)
	Yes, sometimes	863 (27.8)
	No	444 (14.3)
	I did not want or need support and encouragement	153 (4.9)
	Don't know or can't remember	6 (0.2)
At home after the birth of your baby, did your healthcare professionals give you adequate support and encouragement with feeding your baby?	Yes, always	1,788 (59.6)
	Yes, sometimes	651 (21.7)
	No	325 (10.8)
	I did not want or need support and encouragement	216 (7.2)
	Don't know or can't remember	18 (0.6)
Did your healthcare professionals discuss with you the different options for feeding your baby?*	Yes, during pregnancy	2,062 (64.4)
	Yes, during labour or immediately after birth	755 (23.6)
	Yes, after birth while in hospital	1,006 (31.4)
	Yes, after birth while at home	482 (15.1)
	No	258 (8.1)
	I did not want or need discussion of different options	381 (11.9)
	Don't know or can't remember	27 (0.8)

# What did women say about their experiences of feeding?

- 824 comments mentioned feeding
- 4 main themes:

## Support and encouragement from healthcare professionals

- Some women experienced a lack of support, regardless of feeding method

## Information and advice on feeding

- Some women received contradictory advice from healthcare professionals

## Pressure to feed in a particular way and (lack of) 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



# Support and encouragement from HCPs

- Support and encouragement made breastfeeding easier
- Some felt that while breastfeeding was encouraged during pregnancy, this appeared to no longer be the case after birth, particularly on busy postnatal wards
- Formula feeding also presented challenges for many women
- Mothers who had access to a lactation consultant expressed their appreciation of this support.

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

"The lactation nurse was excellent in terms of support and encouragement."

"All the other moms had nurses who spent a lot of time with them because they were breastfeeding, even though I was also having problems getting my baby to feed from bottle I was never asked if I was ok or needed help. I left hospital as soon as I could."



# Information and advice about feeding

- Conflicting advice from healthcare professionals
- Lack of information was highlighted
- Benefits of breastfeeding support groups and classes.

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

"My breasts became much engorged as I was not given appropriate advice regarding pumping when combination feeding. This resulted in me exclusively bottle feeding."

"Our Public Health Nurse was excellent when we came home, she visited frequently and was so kind and knowledgeable about breastfeeding which was a great help."

## Pressure to feed in a particular way and (lack of) respect for personal preferences

- Pressure around feeding
- First time mothers described pressure as difficult
- Vulnerability post-birth.

"I was offered a bottle for my baby by 2 separate midwives. I am exclusively breastfeeding and only for it was my second baby so I knew my milk would come I probably would have listened to them and taken the bottle."

"The midwives are amazing and incredibly supportive... particularly when it came to me breastfeeding my baby and ensuring my wishes to exclusively breastfeed were met."

"Less pressure to be put on mothers to breastfeed... Some nurses could see it wasn't working but told me to keep trying... to be aware how vulnerable first time mothers can be especially on this particular topic."

# Environment and resources

- Lack of staff to assist with feeding.
- Women stressed the importance of privacy on the wards when feeding.

“The midwives were excellent at all parts of my hospital stay for delivery but they were so over worked and could not give me enough attention that a new mum needs to help with things like breastfeeding”.

“Day time care on the ward was great although being a breast feeding mother I would have preferred if catering staff didn't just automatically pull back the curtain around my bed when they came in with meals”

# Women's experiences of initiating feeding in Ireland

Midwifery 107 (2022) 103263



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Midwifery

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/midw](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/midw)



## Women's experiences of initiating feeding shortly after birth in Ireland: A secondary analysis of quantitative and qualitative data from the National Maternity Experience Survey



Róisín Murphy\*, Conor Foley, Anna Maria Verling, Tracy O'Carroll, Rachel Flynn<sup>1</sup>, Daniela Rohde<sup>1</sup>

*National Care Experience Programme, Health Information and Quality Authority, George's Court, George's Lane, Smithfield, Dublin 7, D07 E98Y, Ireland*

### ARTICLE INFO

*Article history:*  
Received 1 November 2021  
Revised 14 December 2021  
Accepted 23 January 2022

*Keywords:*  
Breastfeeding  
Bottle feeding  
Health communication  
Respect  
Feeding experiences

### ABSTRACT

*Objective:* To explore women's experiences of initiating and continuing breast or formula feeding shortly after birth in Ireland's maternity hospitals and units, as well as at home after birth.

*Design:* Mixed methods secondary analysis of qualitative and quantitative data from the Irish National Maternity Experience Survey 2020.

*Setting:* All 19 maternity hospitals and units in the Republic of Ireland and the national home births service. Women were asked about their maternity care experiences, including antenatal care, care during labour and birth, feeding, and care at home after birth.

*Participants:* A total of 3,205 women who gave birth in October or November 2019 participated in the study (50% response rate).

*Measurements:* Free-text comments related to women's experiences of initiating and continuing breast or formula feeding were analysed using thematic analysis. Quantitative data were described using means (SD) and frequencies and percentages.

*Findings:* In the first few days after birth, 41.9% of women breastfed exclusively, 29.0% used formula and breast milk, and 29.1% bottle-fed only. Seven-hundred and twenty women (22.5%) made 824 comments related to feeding. Four themes were identified: (1) support and encouragement from healthcare professionals, (2) information and advice regarding feeding, (3) Pressure to feed in a particular way and (lack of) respect for personal preferences, and (4) hospital environment and resources.

*Key conclusions:* Some women experienced a lack of support with feeding their babies, regardless of feeding method. Clear and concise information on feeding practices and home supports could help to support mothers with breast or formula feeding.

*Implications for practice:* It is important that healthcare professionals provide evidence-based information and support, while respecting women's choices. Lactation consultants could offer training and consistent information to healthcare professionals as well as providing specialist support to mothers who experience problems with breastfeeding during their hospital stay and in the postnatal period.

© 2022 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.



# Conclusions and recommendations

## Conclusions

- Women highlighted that while breastfeeding is encouraged and supported in antenatal care, there was a lack of resources and support for breastfeeding women in the postnatal ward.
- Women highlighted that there was at times insufficient staff to support all feeding practices.
- First-time mothers especially felt vulnerable and inexperienced with feeding.

## Recommendations

- Importance of evidence-based information and support, while respecting women's choices.
- Clear and concise information on feeding practices and home supports.





THANK YOU

QUESTIONS

Follow us on:



@CareExperience



/YourInpatientExperience  
/CareExperience



@CareExperience

[www.yourexperience.ie](http://www.yourexperience.ie)

We're committed to excellence in healthcare



An Roinn Sláinte  
Department of Health