



Registered Nurses
Association
of Ontario

L'Association des infirmières
et infirmiers autorisés de
l'Ontario

Policy Statement

Breastfeeding

The **Registered Nurses Association of Ontario (RNAO)** endorses the WHO/UNICEF statement on breastfeeding:

Breastfeeding is an unequalled way of providing ideal food for the healthy growth and development of infants and has a unique biological and emotional influence on the health of both mother and child... For breastfeeding to be successfully initiated and established, mothers need the active support, during pregnancy and following birth, not only of their families and communities but also of the entire health system.¹

Breastfeeding is a health behavior that must be supported, protected, and promoted. The World Health Organization (WHO), with the unanimous support of all members, reinforced its commitment to breastfeeding in 2001 through Resolution 54.2. The resolution states in part "to strengthen activities and develop new approaches to protect, promote and support exclusive breastfeeding for six months ... and to provide safe and appropriate complementary foods, with continued breastfeeding for up to two years of age or beyond."² This resolution is based on growing epidemiological evidence that breastmilk protects and enhances the health of infants, children, and adults.

While a large percentage of mothers and babies initiate breastfeeding, a much smaller number continue to breastfeed to six months

¹ WHO/UNICEF - Joint Statement. *Protecting, Promoting and Supporting Breastfeeding: The Special Role of Maternity Services*. Geneva: WHO. 1989. pg. 3.

² The resolution can be found at www.babymilkaction.org/regs/res542.html

and beyond. Canadian studies have found breastfeeding initiation rates of 78% and 80% but significant decreases in the continuation with six-month duration rates of 33% and 22%.³

According to WHO, "breastfeeding is an endangered practice that requires the support of everyone in society to nurture it back to its full strength." Many factors endanger breastfeeding: inconsistent information; inadequate and/or inappropriate breastfeeding assessment, intervention and follow-up; and, lack of support for continued breastfeeding. Addressing these and other challenges requires the commitment of health care organizations, government, health care professionals, communities, families and individuals to ensure a totally 'Baby Friendly'TM environment.

Registered nurses (RNs) providing breastfeeding support must possess the skills, knowledge, judgement and attitude to fully assess, manage and support the breastfeeding mother, infant, and family. Research demonstrates higher breastfeeding initiation rates when health care professionals have increased knowledge and skills.⁴ To achieve the full health benefits of breastfeeding, registered nurses play many critical roles.

³ Health Canada. National Population Health Survey and the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth. 1999.

⁴ Lazzaro, E., Anderson, J. and Auld, G. *Medical Professionals' Attitudes Towards Breastfeeding*. Journal of Human Lactation. 11(23): 97-101 and Hartely, B.M., and O'Connor, M.E. *Evaluation of the "Best Start" breastfeeding education program*. Archives of Pediatric Adolescence Medicine, 150 (8), 868-871 and Humphreys, A.S., Thompson, N.J., & Miner, K.R. *Intentions to breastfeed in low-income pregnant women: The role of social support and previous experience*. Birth, 25 (3) 131- 135.

These include:

- **As direct care providers**, RNs integrate the most current skills and knowledge about breastfeeding to provide highly relevant care⁵;
- **As advocates**, RNs work to promote the development of policies and procedures that fully support breastfeeding and ultimately contribute to the realization of a positive breastfeeding culture;
- **As educators**, RNs teach mothers, families and health care providers about the theory and practice of breastfeeding;
- **As collaborators**, RNs, with other health professionals and community services, support practices that promote, protect and support breastfeeding;
- **As researchers**, RNs contribute to an expanding knowledge base that provides ongoing substantiation of breastfeeding and encourages increasingly effective care of the mother and baby in hospital and in the community;
- **As nursing leaders**, RNs ensure the appropriate policies and procedures to protect and promote successful breastfeeding for all mothers and babies.

Registered nurses are key in promoting and endorsing breastfeeding "best practice" according to the most current research-based evidence. Only through our collective efforts can breastfeeding become the cultural norm in Ontario.

The Registered Nurses Association of Ontario endorses the following initiatives to create, support and sustain breastfeeding friendly environments:

- *Resolution 54.2 of the WHO*⁶ clarifies the optimal duration for exclusive⁷ breastfeeding (six months) and the appropriate marketing of complementary foods for infants. There is considerable evidence that this approach provides the most benefit for public health.

⁵ We refer the reader to RNAO's Nursing Best Practice Guideline, Breastfeeding.

⁶ Resolution 54.2 of the World Health Organization can be found at www.babymilkaction.org/regs/res542.html

⁷ Exclusive means breastmilk only – no formula, water, teas, herbal drinks, juices vitamins or solids.

- The *International Code of Marketing Breastmilk Substitutes (1981) of WHO*⁸ protects and promotes breastfeeding through standardized guidelines on the proper use and marketing of breast milk substitutes (e.g., infant formulas, follow-on formulas, teas, bottles, pacifiers, etc).
- *The Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative (BFHI)*TM established by UNICEF and WHO is based upon the "Ten Steps to Successful Breastfeeding"⁹ and is a mechanism that directs best practice in the care for and support of breastfeeding mothers and infants in a hospital. Strong evidence exists that hospital practices that comply with the "Ten Steps" are effective in increasing the initiation and duration of breastfeeding.
- *Breastfeeding Committee of Canada (BCC) and the Ontario Breastfeeding Committee (OBC)* were established to protect, support, and promote breastfeeding through the "Baby Friendly"TM Initiative" at the national and provincial levels. Registered nurses can play an active role in lobbying the Ontario government to recognize the committee as the Ontario authority for the provincial implementation of Baby FriendlyTM Initiative.^{10, 11}
- *Baby Friendly*TM Initiative in the Community Health Services from BCC. The "Seven Point Plan"¹² is a mechanism that directs best practice in the care for and support of breastfeeding mothers and infants in

⁸ The Code can be found at

<http://www.geocities.com/HotSprings/Falls/1136/webdoc23.htm>

⁹ Further information can be found at

<http://www.babyfriendly.org.uk/home.htm>

¹⁰ The Breastfeeding Committee of Canada uses the term Baby FriendlyTM Initiative to reflect the continuum of care for mothers and babies. The BCC oversees the implementation of the Baby FriendlyTM Initiative in Canada. It is up to each province to implement.

¹¹ The Ontario Breastfeeding Committee, in partnership with the BCC, implements WHO/UNICEF "Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative"TM in Ontario. This entails evaluating the Ontario situation, networking with hospitals/maternity facilities and community settings intending to become "Baby Friendly", advocating for breastfeeding, acting as a resource centre for BFI, delineating educational needs and encouraging breastfeeding research.

¹² Details on the Seven Point Plan can be found at <http://www.geocities.com/HotSprings/Falls/1136/webdoc43.htm>

community health settings. This "Plan" provides a vehicle for the continuum of breastfeeding friendly practices.

RNAO believes that the encouragement of breastfeeding is an important health promotion and illness prevention initiative. The Association respects individual values and beliefs and recognizes the impact that social, economic, political and environmental factors have on a woman's ability to choose breastfeeding.

We also realize that we have yet to achieve an environment fully supportive of breastfeeding. As registered nurses, we have the expertise and experience to lobby for the development of a supportive breastfeeding culture, where Ontario women are fully comfortable in "Breastfeeding...Anytime... Anywhere."¹³

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¹³ From Health Canada Poster, quoted in *Infact Canada Newsletter*, Spring 1994, p. 5