

Breastfeeding beyond 1 year in Ireland: a lens to overcoming contemporary challenges

D. McGuinness¹, N. Vickers¹, R. Kincaid², G. Paul³.

1. School of Nursing, Midwifery and Health Systems, University College Dublin, Belfield, Dublin 4, Ireland.
2. International Board Certified Lactation Consultant in Private Practice, Ireland.
3. School of Nursing, Psychotherapy and Community Health, Dublin City University, Whitehall, Dublin 9, Ireland.

“Breastfeeding is the clinical gold standard for infant feeding and nutrition. We must do more to create supportive and safe environments for mothers who choose to breastfeed”.

—Dr. Ruth Petersen, Director of CDC's Division of Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Obesity, USA.

Dear Editor,

The World Health Organization (WHO, 2025)¹ recommends that infants are breastfed exclusively for the first six months of life, continuing up to two years or beyond, in combination with safe complementary foods. Suboptimal breastfeeding practices contribute to increased morbidity and mortality among infants and children worldwide. Globally 820,000 children's lives under the age of five years could be saved, if all children from 0-23 months were optimally breastfed (WHO 2025)¹.

Breastfeeding in the first year of life is associated with a reduced risk of asthma,² less overweight and obesity,³ and a reduced risk of hospitalisation for any infection⁴. In addition, there is evidence of the impact of a longer duration of breastfeeding on maternal health outcomes, notably a reduction in the risk of developing breast and ovarian cancer⁵.

In Ireland, 64% of women initiate breastfeeding with exclusive breastfeeding rates at 3 months reported at 35.7%⁶. Of note, differences exist across socio economic groups, with higher breastfeeding rates recorded in higher socio economic groups. Breastfeeding rates beyond 3 months are currently not recorded nationally.

Our research sought to explore women's experiences of breastfeeding beyond 1 year in the Republic of Ireland⁷. In this respect we engaged with a qualitative descriptive design and interviewed 14 women. We identified a degree of suboptimal health literacy in relation to breastfeeding with some women of the opinion that they should wean their infant from the breast at 6 months. Women's knowledge and competence improved as their breastfeeding

journey continued and through their engagement with online breastfeeding support groups. Breastfeeding beyond one year was associated with a close attachment and bonding experience and became a “parenting tool”. We will share that some women experienced a lack of support from healthcare professionals when engaging with the health service as mother’s breastfeeding a toddler. Interestingly, some women experienced intense marketing of commercial formula milk through social media as they searched for infant feeding information. The Lancet breastfeeding series highlights how breastfeeding is increasingly challenged in a market driven world⁸.

Health care professionals that support breastfeeding within the community setting in Ireland, notably the general practitioner (GP), general practice nurse (GPN) and public health nurse are paramount to the success of continued breastfeeding practices. Research at national level has identified that GPs and GPNs are motivated, supporting exclusive and continued breastfeeding practices, breastfeeding in public, supporting breastfeeding on return to work and interested in attending further breastfeeding education⁹.

It is important that health care professionals embrace a targeted approach to breastfeeding beyond 1 year, discussing the scientific benefits of breastfeeding with pregnant women and providing skilled professional breastfeeding support which will in turn improve health outcomes for women and children across all socio-economic groups.

In summary, supporting breastfeeding mothers and families with continued breastfeeding beyond 1 year is a professional, cultural, economic, and societal responsibility and a challenge for us all.

Declaration of Conflicts of Interest:

None declared.

Corresponding Author:

Denise McGuinness,
School of Nursing, Midwifery and Health Systems,
University College Dublin,
Belfield,
Dublin 4,
Ireland.

E-Mail: denise.mcguinness@ucd.ie

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