

Breastfeeding

Policy Position Statement

- Key messages:** Infant feeding practices have many implications for public health and planetary health in Australia. To achieve optimal growth, development, and health, the WHO recommends infants should be exclusively breastfed for the first six months of life and continue breastfeeding as part of an increasingly diversified diet into the second year of life and beyond.
- Available data suggests most mothers in Australia initiate breastfeeding. However, very few are exclusively breastfed to six months and most have stopped breastfeeding at 12 months. Increasing the duration and prevalence of exclusive and continued breastfeeding would improve public health in Australia.
- Achieving this will require a renewed commitment to monitoring infant feeding practices and allocating resources to protecting and supporting breastfeeding in health services and the wider community.
- Key policy positions:**
- The PHAA asks the Australian Government to increase its support for the work of the Australian Breastfeeding Association and endorses its vision that: “breastfeeding is recognised as important by all Australians and is a valued cultural norm”.
 - The PHAA endorses the priority action areas of the *Australian National Breastfeeding Strategy: 2019 and Beyond*. We note that little funding has been allocated to implementing the Strategy and we strongly call on the Australian Government to urgently allocate sufficient funding to implementation and evaluation of the Strategy.
- Audience:** Federal, State and Territory Governments, policymakers and program managers, PHAA members, media.
- Responsibility:** PHAA Women’s Health Special Interest Group
- Contact:** [Women’s Health SIG](#)
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PHAA affirms the following principles:

1. Breastfeeding affects public health in Australia. Improving adherence to the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) recommendations for infant feeding will improve public health in Australia and reduce health care costs for all Australians.
2. *As stated in a Lancet editorial “Breastmilk makes the world healthier, smarter, and more equal...genuine and urgent commitment is needed from governments and health authorities to establish a new normal: where every woman can expect to breastfeed, and to receive the support she needs to do so.”¹*

PHAA notes the following evidence:

3. When babies are not breastfed they have a higher risk of illness, such as necrotising and enterocolitis, diarrhoea, respiratory infections and otitis media, thus increased rates of hospitalisation.¹ In the long term there is also a higher risk of overweight and obesity in children who were breastfed for shorter periods as babies.¹
4. Breastfeeding can reduce the risk for women of certain cancers (ovarian, cervical and breast) as well as type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart disease.²
5. Most mothers in Australia initiate breastfeeding but the majority cease exclusive breastfeeding earlier than recommended. The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) recommends that all babies are exclusively breastfed for the first six months of life, and together with complementary food, continue to be breastfed for at least 12 months.² The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends exclusive breastfeeding (with no other foods or liquids) for the first six months of life with continued breastfeeding for up to two years and beyond.³ Data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) indicate that only 28% of infants are continuing to be breastfed at 12 months and beyond. The Study suggests that early breastfeeding cessation is associated with younger maternal age and low educational attainment.⁴
6. The Australian *National Breastfeeding Strategy: 2019 and Beyond* recognises that infant feeding decisions are influenced by societal pressures, societal attitudes to mothering, access to breastfeeding education, professional lactation support, employment arrangements and workplace settings, partner and family, religious and cultural beliefs, and mental health barriers.⁵
7. The 2019 Strategy aimed to increase rates of exclusive breastfeeding to around six months of age to 40% by 2022, and to 50% by 2025, and provide support for the Baby Friendly Health Initiative.⁵
8. Breastfeeding rates have been collected in an ad hoc manner apart from the Australian National Infant Feeding Survey in 2010; which is the only comprehensive survey. The National Health Surveys have collected infant feeding data on small samples of children. Despite the 2019 Strategy promise of a full nationwide survey every five years, this has not occurred, so there is little reliable information to inform promotion strategies, policy development and understand the impact suboptimal breastfeeding rates has on the Australian health system.⁶ In 2024, the WHO reported that Australia only has ‘some provisions’ of the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes enacted as law.^{7,8}
9. Until 2025, The *Marketing in Australia of Infant Formulas (MAIF)* Agreement was Australia’s response to

the International Code. The MAIF agreement was a voluntary agreement between the Australian Government and signatory companies that import and/or manufacture breast milk substitutes. The MAIF agreement had a much narrower scope than the International code and was not enforceable under legislation. In 2021 the ACCC reauthorised the MAIF agreement for three years only to allow time for the Australian Government to undertake a review of MAIF.¹⁰ In February 2025, the ACCC decided not to reauthorise MAIF,¹¹ and in parallel, the Department of Health, Ageing and Disability committed to develop and implement a mandatory, legislated framework to govern infant formula marketing within a two-year timeline.¹²

10. When maternal breast milk is not available in sufficient quantity, donor breast milk is an important alternative source of nutrition, particularly for low birth weight or premature infants.⁹ Pasteurized donor human milk should be available to preterm and low birth weight infants in all states and territories.
11. Health professionals and consumers need accurate information about safe use of medicines for breastfeeding women. Most prescriptions and over-the-counter medicines are compatible with breastfeeding, but each case should be specifically assessed by a health professional.¹⁰ Uncertainty amongst parents and health professionals means that mothers may not initiate breastfeeding or may cease unnecessarily.¹¹
12. Implementing this policy would contribute towards the achievement of UN Sustainable Development Goals 3 – [Good Health and Wellbeing](#).

PHAA seeks the following actions:

13. Full implementation and funding for the *National Breastfeeding Strategy 2019 and Beyond*.
14. Ongoing funding provided for breastfeeding research in Australia, particularly for evaluation of independent and cumulative effects of breastfeeding interventions aimed at individuals, group (health services, home, work and community environments) and societal levels.
15. Breastfeeding knowledge, clinical competence and attitudes of health professionals to be regularly audited and updated through implementation of the Baby Friendly Health Initiative (BFHI).
16. Antenatal and postnatal breastfeeding education provided as part of normal clinical care including:
 - a. Funding for the production and dissemination of nationally consistent, accessible information on breast and artificial feeding for parents and parents-to-be.
 - b. Breastfeeding education and support, including evidence of continuity throughout the perinatal and postnatal periods, included in clinical governance and audit mechanisms.
17. Legislative support for breastfeeding at environmental and social levels:
 - a. All businesses and employers provide flexible work practices, work breaks and facilities to allow employees to combine breastfeeding and work.
 - b. Large organisations encouraged to provide on-site childcare.
 - c. Paid parental leave for at least 6 months, and preferably 12 months, adopted nationally.
 - d. Provision of parenting facilities (to enable breastfeeding) in public places, included in local government planning requirements for all large public amenities such as shopping centres
18. The Federal Government legislate in full the International Code and subsequent World Health Assembly resolutions, the scope of this including:

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- a. All breastmilk substitutes products marketed for infants and children up to 36 months of age;
- b. Development of legislation and policies must be government led and free from conflict of interest;
- c. This comprehensive legislation should be administered by the Department of Health, Disability and Ageing in line with international best practice;
- d. A comprehensive plan for monitoring and enforcement of this legislation using an expanded version of the WHO's Netcode to ensure digital marketing is adequately included;¹⁶ and
- e. Widely disseminate information to health professionals about their obligations under the Code.

19. Address sponsorship and conflicts of interest issues:

- a. Government departments and health professional organisations not accept any funding or other support from infant formula manufacturers for health professional education, including conference sponsorship and exhibition.¹²
- b. Editors and publishers of journals and magazines for health professionals not accept infant formula advertisements.¹³

20. Governments to explore the best way to provide easily accessible evidence-based accurate information on medicines for breastfeeding women for health professionals and consumers.

21. Government support financially, the development and ongoing operation of human milk banks in all states and territories. Volunteer donor milk available free of charge to any infant who requires human milk.

PHAA resolves to:

22. Advocate for the above steps to be taken based on the principles in this position statement.

Adopted 1995, Revised in 2002, 2007, 2010, 2013, 2016, 2019, 2022 and 2025

References

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