

# Why breastfeeding and work can, and should, go together

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Returning to work after maternity leave rates as one of the top reasons why mothers stop breastfeeding their babies before they should. The [2017 World Breastfeeding Week](#) runs from 1-7 August with the aim of uniting all sectors of society in the protection, promotion and support of breastfeeding. The campaign, co-ordinated by the [World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action \(WABA\)](#), identifies four critical focus areas, one of which is women's productivity and work.



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Working SA mums are entitled to a minimum of four consecutive months of maternity leave. Many take at least one month of that leave prior to the birth, and then make their return to work when their infants are just around three months old. However, exclusive breastfeeding of an infant from birth to six months is what is recommended as optimal nutrition by the World Health Organisation. Therefore, the only way that working new mums can meet these important health standards is if they can breastfeed or express breast milk for some months at their workplaces.

The benefits of creating workplaces that are friendly to nursing mums go beyond just the physical welfare of our new generations. Cath Day, registered dietitian and spokesperson for [ADSA \(The Association for Dietetics in South Africa\)](#) points out: "There is a vast body of scientific research that has shown that breastfeeding, as exclusive nutrition in the first six months and then as a supplementary food for two years and beyond, also protects and benefits the physical health of

the mother; while impacting positively on her emotional well-being as she forms the essential bond with her new child. It is clearly in the interests of the employers of child-bearing women to protect, promote and support them during the times when they are breastfeeding because companies need their employees to be healthy and optimally productive.”

ADSA recommends that businesses formalise their support of breastfeeding in the policies, standards and practices of their employee wellness programmes.

### ***So what can businesses do practically to protect and support the nursing mums on their workforce?***

- **Uphold the law** - Corporates must recognise and facilitate the legal rights of SA breastfeeding mothers enshrined in the Basic Conditions of Employment Act. Up until their babies are six months old, working mums are entitled to two, paid 30-minute breaks every work day for breastfeeding or expressing milk.
- **Know and promote the benefits of breastfeeding** - “It helps to have employers who are knowledgeable about why breastfeeding is so important and a commitment to protecting, supporting and promoting breastfeeding in the workplace,” says Cath Day. “As part of the employee wellness programme, registered dietitians can be engaged to make presentations to all staff on the advantages of a breastfeeding-friendly work environment and how to make it happen in your company. The straightforward facts and the inarguable science go a long way to reducing the discomforts and stigmas people might attach to breastfeeding.”
- **Provide the place** - Nowadays it is widely regarded as completely unacceptable for breastfeeding mums to have to lock themselves in a public toilet, or their car, to breastfeed or express milk at work because they have nowhere else to go. Many companies realise that a breastfeeding-friendly workplace means providing a secure and comfortable space for working mums to spend their 30-minute breastfeeding breaks. Preferably, this private room should have a door that locks, comfortable seating, plug points for breast pumps and a refrigerator for the safe storage of breast milk.
- **Be flexible and adaptable** - Part-time, flexi-time or temporary work-from-home plans can be very effective solutions for breastfeeding mums, and should especially be employed by companies who provide no proper facilities for the legal breastfeeding breaks in their workplace.
- **Offer child-care facilities** - A number of progressive companies with a clear focus on employee engagement provide workplace child care facilities for the babies and small children of their employees. This is ideal for breastfeeding mums as they can more easily and quickly breastfeed their infants and need to express less milk.

ADSA spokesperson Zelda Ackerman, whose areas of expertise include baby and child feeding, urges new working mums to know their rights and to get the support that they need from their bosses and colleagues so that going back to work doesn’t become a barrier to the continued breastfeeding of their infant. “It is really important for South Africa as a country to transform to a culture of being breastfeeding-friendly in every environment,” she says, “We have to consider the potential health burdens of being a country with exceptionally low rates of breastfeeding, and turn this trend around. From the family home to the work environment to society at large, breastfeeding mothers need support.”

### ***Zelda’s top tips for breastfeeding mums returning to work include:***

- Before your return to work, give yourself enough time to get to grips with finding the pump that works best for you and regularly expressing milk - and give your baby enough time to get used to bottle-fed breast milk. Time and practice will help you both to establish this as a stress-free routine before the big change up ahead.
- Also, ahead of time, build up a stock of breast milk at home – it can be refrigerated and frozen. Stored breast milk should always be dated, and you retain more nutritional quality if you refrigerate it immediately after you have expressed.
- On your return to work, have straightforward conversations with your bosses and/or team members, as necessary, so that they are clear about your breastfeeding goals and needs. Be clear about your legal right to two, paid 30 minute breastfeeding breaks each working day, and establish with them how this is going to work best for you and what accommodations you will need.

- If you encounter resistance or lack of support in your workplace, get help rather than give up breastfeeding. Other working mothers in your workplace and HR personnel may help to raise awareness of the importance of your continued breastfeeding. External sources of help can include breastfeeding support organisations and registered dietitians.
- You can reduce discomfort from engorgement and pace your two breastfeeding breaks optimally at work if you arrange your workday mornings so that you give your baby a good feed that ends just before you leave for work; and then breastfeed your baby again as soon as you get home. Co-ordinate this well with your baby's caregiver so that they don't bottle-feed just before you get home. If you are breastfeeding a baby older than six months of age, make sure your caregiver doesn't provide late afternoon snacks so that your child is ready for a good breastfeed when you get home from work.
- Be patient and resilient. Our modern world doesn't necessarily make breastfeeding easy, natural and stress-free. But it is as important as it has ever been to both you and your baby. The science is clear, the more you can; the better for you, your baby and our society at large.

For information on World Breastfeeding Week 2017 visit [www.worldbreastfeedingweek.org](http://www.worldbreastfeedingweek.org)

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