

5 Things Employers Should Know about Breastfeeding

1. You are required by law to accommodate nursing moms.

The law used to be fuzzy on this, and it used to vary from state to state. But since the health care reform bill was passed in March 2010, it's crystal clear. By law, all employers must provide breastfeeding employees with **reasonable break time** and a **private, non-bathroom place to express breast milk** during the workday, up until the child's first birthday. You can read the [full text of the law here](#).

2. We need time.

What is reasonable break time? Typically, it takes 15 minutes to pump, plus time to get to and from the lactation room and clean the pump parts. Most women need to pump 2-3 times a day in an 8-hour period. If we're not given adequate time to pump, we can develop a pretty serious infection called mastitis which is painful, can cause a fever, and may require antibiotics. And even if a woman doesn't develop mastitis, if she doesn't have enough time during the day to pump, her milk supply will start to disappear.

3. We need privacy.

We need a small, quiet space (not a bathroom stall!) with windows that can be covered, an outlet, and a door that locks.

It's important to understand that breastfeeding and pumping breast milk are two very different things. Lots of women breastfeed in public. It's sweet. It's natural. It's part of caring for a baby. It can be done discreetly for those who are modest, with a cloth draped over the baby's head.

Pumping is a totally different deal. It is *not* natural. Pumping involves complicated equipment that needs to be assembled and disassembled at every pump break. The pump itself makes loud, groaning noises and evokes thoughts of dairy farm machinery. Asking a nursing mom to pump in a space that is not private is like asking someone to pee in the hallway. It's barbaric.

Here are some of the unacceptable places women have told me they had to pump: a bathroom stall, a closet that doesn't close completely, a storage room with foul smelling solvents, a cubicle, a car, a conference room with clear glass walls, and rooms that don't lock.



4. We need understanding.

Unless they have children of their own, most adults don't get this whole breastfeeding thing. Supervisors and coworkers may act resentful about the "special breaks" nursing moms get. They may imply that there is something weird or even perverted about pumping. They may think storing milk in the company refrigerator is gross.

It's important that you, the boss, set a positive, respectful tone for the rest of the company.

One way to do this is to be proactive. Talk with your employee, preferably before she goes on maternity leave. Let her know that you'd like to work with her to make sure she has the appropriate accommodations if she decides she wants to continue breastfeeding when she returns to work. The last thing an exhausted new mom needs is to try to explain to her HR director what a breast pump is the first day back from maternity leave.

If you hear or hear of rude comments from coworkers about a breastfeeding mom, it is your job to address them, just as you would address a racist or sexist comment in the workplace.

We need your empathy. New moms are torn in two directions when they return to work. Sometimes it feels impossible to be a good employee and be a good parent. There is nothing selfish about a new mom who is making the extra effort to continue breastfeeding and still do her job. She is a hero. You should give her a trophy. Seriously. If you don't believe me, see #5.

5. Everyone benefits, including your business.

One of the primary reasons a woman breastfeeds her baby is the health benefits. Breast milk is packed with disease-fighting substances that add up to healthier babies and healthier mothers, and that happens to add up to a healthier workforce, and a healthier economy (through lower health care costs). The benefits are too numerous to list out. Here are a few:

Baby benefits

- Lower risk of stomach viruses, respiratory illnesses, ear infections, and meningitis
- Lower risk of various conditions later in life, including type 1 & 2 diabetes, high cholesterol, high blood pressure, obesity, allergies, and inflammatory bowel disease
- Improved cognitive development (Yup. Studies show breastfed babies have [slightly higher IQs.](#))

Mother benefits

- Lower risk of breast cancer and type 2 diabetes
- Mitigation of stress and postpartum depression
- Joyful bonding with baby
- Cheaper than formula (although breast pumps aren't cheap)

Business benefits (from [The Business Case for Breastfeeding](#))

- Lower turnover
Retention rates for companies with lactation support programs are 94%, versus the national average of only 59%.
- Lower absenteeism
One-day absences to care for sick children occur more than twice as often for mothers of formula feeding infants.

- Lower medical insurance claims
For every 1,000 babies not breastfed, a study found there are 2,033 extra physician visits, 212 extra hospitalization days, and 609 extra prescriptions for three illnesses alone—ear, respiratory, and gastrointestinal infection.
- Improved productivity & morale
Employees at companies that support breastfeeding report improved morale, better satisfaction with their jobs, and higher productivity.

Economy benefits

And last but not least...If 90 percent of families were able to breastfeed exclusively for six months (as doctors recommend), the United States could save [\\$13 billion annually](#).

Need more information?

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has [The Business Case for Breastfeeding](#) with all kinds of information for employers who need help complying with the law.

The [National Breastfeeding Helpline](#) (800-994-9662) is a free service staffed with peer counselors who offer breastfeeding support and can answer questions in English and Spanish.

Learn from other companies' mistakes: [“This Sucks: Breast Pumping at Work”](#)