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Published in:
Public Health Nutrition

DOI:
[10.1017/S1368980016000367](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1368980016000367)

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Recommended citation(APA):
Holowko, N., Jones, M., Koupil, I., Tooth, L., & Mishra, G. (2016). High education and increased parity are associated with breast-feeding initiation and duration among Australian women. *Public Health Nutrition*, 19(14), 2551-2561. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1368980016000367>

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Public Health Nutrition, Volume 19, Issue 14

DOI: 10.1017/S1368980016000367

Published online: 21 March 2016, pp. 2551-2561

Print publication: October 2016

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Abstract

Objective

Breast-feeding is associated with positive maternal and infant health and development outcomes. To assist identifying women less likely to meet infant nutritional guidelines, we investigated the role of socio-economic position and parity on initiation of and sustaining breast-feeding for at least 6 months.

Design

Prospective cohort study.

Setting

Australia.

Subjects

Parous women from the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health (born 1973–78), with self-reported reproductive and breast-feeding history (*N* 4777).

Results

While 89 % of women (83 % of infants) had ever breast-fed, only 60 % of infants were breast-fed for at least 6 months. Multiparous women were more likely to breast-feed their first child (~90 % *v.* ~71 % of primiparous women), and women who breast-fed their first child were more likely to breast-feed subsequent children. Women with a low education (adjusted OR (95 % CI): 2.09 (1.67, 2.62)) or a very low-educated parent (1.47 (1.16, 1.88)) had increased odds of not initiating breast-feeding with their first or subsequent children. While fewer women initiated breast-feeding with their youngest child, this was most pronounced among high-educated women. While ~60 % of women breast-fed their first, second and third child for at least 6 months, low-educated women (first child, adjusted OR (95 % CI): 2.19 (1.79, 2.68)) and women with a very low (1.82 (1.49, 2.22)) or low-educated parent (1.69 (1.33, 2.14)) had increased odds of not breast-feeding for at least 6 months.

Conclusions

A greater understanding of barriers to initiating and sustaining breast-feeding, some of which are socio-economic-specific, may assist in reducing inequalities in infant breast-feeding.

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