

What do we know from current evidence about the experience of women who breastfeed beyond twelve months of age?

A systematic review of qualitative evidence

Introduction

Breastfeeding duration varies around the world; in developed nations breastfeeding beyond infancy is unusual and hard to measure, with the numbers in the UK likely to be very small. There is limited understanding of how women experience breastfeeding once it becomes uncommon. Research undertaken in the latter part of the twentieth-century is still referred to in more recent work; findings are similar. These include experiencing breastfeeding long-term as stigmatising, lack of support from family members, distrust of health professionals and pressure to wean. We were interested in whether the experience in the twenty-first century, reported in qualitative research, is different to that in the earlier literature. Although breastfeeding long-term continues to be unusual, it has become more visible, including on social media. This review was driven by our interest in finding out whether this has been reflected in the academic literature.

Methods

- Protocol registered with Prospero in March 2019 (CRD4201912703).
- Databases searched from 2000-Feb 2019: Maternity & Infant Care (MIDIRS), CINAHL Plus, BND (British Nursing Database) and PsychInfo
- Scopus used for follow-up citation searching
- Truncation captured all variations of terms and adjacency operators were used to restrict the appearance of search terms in different concepts to within two words (N2).
- Personal connections and networking at conferences were also used to identify other work in the process of publication.

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
English language articles	Articles published prior to 2000
Studies exploring the experience of breastfeeding for longer than twelve months	Those which used quantitative methods
Study designs aimed at understanding/describing experiences	Studies that were predominantly about the experience of early breastfeeding/only about breastfeeding infants under 12 months of age
Studies based on research/published since 2000.	Reports of personal experiences published on blogs, websites and in publications from breastfeeding support organisations.

Covidence was used to import references and for title, abstract and full-text screening. Both reviewers screened papers separately; conflicts were resolved through discussion. From an initial 346 papers, 12 were included in the review (7 published, 5 in press at the time of the review). The Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) tool for qualitative research was used to identify any quality issues; no papers were excluded on these grounds. **For detailed information on included papers and citation details for quotations please contact us.**

Thematic synthesis was carried out as outlined by Thomas and Harden (2008), with 'findings/results' text extracted from each paper and imported into NVivo for line-by-line coding, the organization of these codes into 'descriptive' themes and the development of 'analytical' themes. Finally, themes were compared with the earlier literature in order to think about whether the experience of breastfeeding was described differently.

Results

Six analytical themes both related to the pre-21st century findings and further developed them in important ways. Four themes represented new findings, including that long-term breastfeeding is not always positive, that it can unite *and* cause tension (including in relation to mothering), the embodied experience and the importance of online support.

Themes that show how this work relates to, and develops, the previous work:

- **Perception of breastfeeding long-term**

'A weird and suspicious thing to do'

- **Breastfeeding in public**

'Am I a freak doing this?'

'You can do this' vs. its 'a sick thing to do'

- **The importance of supportive families**

'It's about time you need to stop breastfeeding anyway'

- **Health and other professionals**

'Everyone has an opinion'

- **Pressure to do it differently**

'It made me realise it's not weird, it's completely normal'

- **Support from like-minded people**

'I do have times when I feel like hiding under the sofa because yet again someone wants to be nursing off me.'

Themes that represent new findings:

- **Long-term breastfeeding is not always positive**

'There's a lot, there's still a lot of negative attitudes out there'

- **Long-term breastfeeding unites and causes tension**

'I gravitated towards people that were more like minded because it made me feel better and therefore I was a more calm person to be around...'

- **Long-term breastfeeding and the embodied experience**

- **The importance of online support**

'lots of kind of chatting on Facebook in the middle of the night'

'Breastfeeding has improved my relationship with my own body. I feel more feminine. When I was younger, I was ashamed of my small breasts, but no longer – now my breasts feel precious and personal.'

Conclusions

In many ways the experience of breastfeeding long-term is very similar to the experience as reported in the earlier literature. The difficulties, social media use, and identity are described more in the work we reviewed. Importantly also, our review includes work about the experience of long-term breastfeeding in the UK whereas most of the pre-2000 work was from the US, Canada and Australia.

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