

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Active Duty Women's Perceptions of Breast-Feeding Support in the Military Setting

Martin, S. E., Drake, E., Yoder, L., Gibson, M., & Litke, C. A. (2015). Active duty women's perceptions of breast-feeding support in the military setting. *Military Medicine*, 180(8), 1154-1160. doi:10.7205/milmed-d-14-00498

SUMMARY: Perceptions of support for breastfeeding in the workplace for women serving in Active Duty across all branches of the military were examined. Results indicate that military personnel feel there is a moderate level of support for breastfeeding in the workplace. Although many participants identified serious barriers to breastfeeding at work, about half of respondents had positive breastfeeding experiences and support from colleagues or supervisors.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Across branches, officers reported more support for breastfeeding than enlisted personnel, and Latina women reported less support than non-Hispanic White women.
- Women in the Army reported significantly lower support for breastfeeding than those in the Air Force; there was no difference between the Army and the Navy/Marines, or between the Air Force and the Navy/Marines.
- Women identified particular barriers to breastfeeding, including difficulty finding an appropriate place to pump, coworkers complaining that nursing was used as an excuse to avoid work, and feeling like they had to work harder during times they were not nursing to make up for the lost time.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Connect Service members who would like to breast feed to local resources and professionals (e.g., lactation consultants) to help them be successful
- Use demographic indicators to target those women who are least likely to breastfeed with programs that aim to educate about the importance of breastfeeding for mother and infant development
- Offer peer support groups for Active Duty women who have infants in order to increase social support and strategy-sharing

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Provide recommendations for branch-specific lactation policies that support mothers' ability to breastfeed while on Active Duty
- Provide mechanisms for enforcement of existing workplace lactation policies for Active Duty Service members
- Encourage training for professionals who work with Active Duty mothers regarding the importance of breastfeeding and how to best support it

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METHODS

- Active Duty female Service members in any branch of the military were invited to participate in a short online survey if they had breastfed at least one child between January 1, 2010, and September 30, 2013.
- The online survey was posted on a Facebook page about breastfeeding for Active Duty mothers and emailed to breastfeeding support group leaders.
- Perceptions of support for breastfeeding were assessed with the Workplace Breastfeeding Support Scale and one open-ended question inviting participants to share experiences of breastfeeding in the military.
- Perceived support for breastfeeding was compared between military branches.

PARTICIPANTS

- The study included 318 women from all five branches of the U.S. Military.
- About half of the sample (52%) were between 21 and 29 years old, and three-quarters of the sample were White.
- More than half of the participants (57%) were enlisted rank, and 18% were eligible for the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) food assistance program.

LIMITATIONS

- The survey used a convenience sample that did not have adequate representation from some groups, such as Black women and women in the Coast Guard.
- Qualitative data were not fully analyzed.
- Support for breastfeeding was evaluated with a 12-item instrument that might not capture relevant aspects of breastfeeding in the military.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Replicate this study with a larger and more representative sample, particularly including more Black women
- Explore the role of social norms and attitudes about breastfeeding in military settings
- Use qualitative methods to investigate which barriers to breastfeeding women find most difficult to overcome

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