

Health for the Hard to Reach: Self-Management of Breastfeeding

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Health for the Hard to Reach: Self-Management of Breastfeeding

Why are breastfeeding rates low in Britain?

The World Health Organization states that new-borns should be breast fed for 6 months after birth and women are advised by the NHS: ‘The longer you breastfeed, the longer the protection lasts and the greater the benefits. However, despite many efforts to inform new mothers of the benefits to both themselves and their child, breastfeeding rates have continued to decline since the 1960s. After World War II, it was seen as modern and desirable to feed babies on formula. A study by the Lancet showed that only 34% of mothers breastfeed in the UK for the full 6-month period that is recommended. However, it is interesting that 81% of mothers breastfeed for the first 6 weeks and then move onto formula. This is promising to know that breastfeeding is happening albeit for a much shorter time than is recommended. However, it is imperative to find a way to reach the remaining 19% who never breastfeed.

It has been shown that health benefits are extensive for both mother and child as the milk contains important nutrients and antibodies vital to the growth of the baby. The reduced breastfeeding rates have consequences on the health service too and it is speculated that increasing feeding rates up to 45 per cent among mothers in general would save £11 million in treating childhood diseases, and around £26 million in breast-cancer treatments for the mothers. A huge study, led by experts from the World Health Organisation and Unicef, said that child obesity, diabetes and infections could all be significantly reduced if more mothers could be persuaded to breastfeed. This has huge implications and is therefore, a major topic that the health service wants to tackle.

It is evident that breastfeeding is a hugely positive and healthy practice for new mothers to engage in. Although, some sources explain that the social acceptance of breastfeeding has reduced in recent times and that many mothers feel uncomfortable breastfeeding in public.

Peer support is a current initiative employed in communities whereby mothers with experience in breastfeeding help new inexperienced mothers in their local community. This is called NCT which allows new parents to receive support for the first 1000 days since the birth of their child.

How can Digital Health Initiatives Improve Breastfeeding Rates?

It is trusted to speak to other mother’s face to face, why not do it digitally too? Authentication is the barrier to this, how can DHI help with this issue? Peer to peer support could be useful. Missing connectivity layer is the problem. How can DHI address this problem?

Digital health solutions could be used as an initiative to increase breastfeeding rates in Britain. A project run by Digital Health and Care Institute called 'Health for the Hard to Reach' aims to speak with mothers from the 19% of those who did not choose to breastfeed when they had children. The team want to understand the reasoning behind their decision and find a way to engage the women to breastfeed if they choose to have another child. Research shows that in the most deprived areas of Britain, only 20% of mothers breastfed for 6 months compared to the average of 34%. Therefore, trying to reach these mothers could greatly increase overall engagement rates.