Workplace breastfeeding support

1 in 3 people globally suffer from at least one type of malnutrition: this brings significant losses in productivity and potential, and poses challenges to employers in both high-and-low income settings. Given that 58% of the world’s population will spend one third of their time at work during their adult life, occupational health is a critical determinant of overall wellbeing. The workplace - whether in urban or rural, high-or-low income, corporate or supply chains - offers unique opportunities to address malnutrition.

In this series, GAIN outlines the evidence for the 4 most common workforce nutrition interventions.

This evidence brief focuses on workplace breastfeeding support programmes, providing a review of the evidence for impact, best practice and case studies.

**Definition of ‘workplace breastfeeding support’ interventions**

Workplace breastfeeding support includes programmes or company policies which enable working mothers to breastfeed exclusively for 6 months and continually up to 2 years. Such programmes can include: respecting or exceeding national laws on duration of paid maternity leave (ensuring 6 months minimum); providing an appropriate place and time to express/pump milk during work hours and providing options for working mothers such as on-site child care and flexible work schedules. Some programmes include awareness-raising or nutrition education campaigns for mothers and co-workers on the importance of breastfeeding.
Evidence of impact

The programmatic evidence on the impact of workplace breastfeeding support is robust. A recent systematic review of 22 programmes in 9 countries found that a dedicated breastfeeding space at work significantly increases breastfeeding duration and exclusivity. This study also found that breastfeeding rooms were more important than dedicated breaks in prolonging breastfeeding.

Furthermore, several studies show benefits beyond the nutritional advantages for the infant, such as improved productivity and reduced absenteeism in working mothers, and decreased healthcare costs and employee turnover. Indeed, there is substantial evidence to suggest that breastfeeding reduces absenteeism in employees who are parents because their infants are ill less often. This translates into substantial return on investment for business. The U.S. Breastfeeding Committee reports that for every USD 1 invested to support breastfeeding, employers realize a cost saving of EUR 3.

Best practices

- Dedicated spaces and refrigerators reserved for pumping and storing breastmilk, respectively.
- Break times for breastfeeding.
- Raising awareness in all staff.
- Providing breastfeeding support services to help mothers who are having difficulties continuing to breastfeed.

Direct success metrics

- Increased availability of an adequate breastfeeding space and breaks.
- Extended duration of breastfeeding among working mothers.
- Increased rates of exclusive breastfeeding among working mothers.

Company examples (self-reported)

Kohsei Multipak Viet Nam Company Ltd implemented a workplace breastfeeding support policy in 2014 with technical and financial support from Alive & Thrive. They provided breastfeeding rooms, nutrition support to employees, protein-rich lunches and milk fortnightly. They also allowed pregnant women to eat their own nutritious foods during work hours. Kohsei’s managing director recognized that investing in healthy babies is investing in a healthy future workforce by declaring “We welcome your next generation to work for the Kohsei family” (p.13).

Further information

For further information about the workforce nutrition programme, please visit www.gainhealth.org.

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Full references can be downloaded in a longer version of this brief at www.gainhealth.org
References


