19th April 2016

Deputy Róisín Shortall
Dáil Éireann,
Leinster House,
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Dublin 2

Ref: 6269/16

*To ask the Minister for Health the breast-feeding rates; the policy in this regard; and the steps he will take to improve current rates.
- Róisín Shortall.

The 2013 National Perinatal Report report (HSE, 2014) reported breastfeeding rates of 55.7% on discharge from hospital, an increase from 53% in 2009 and 46% in 2004. Rates of exclusive breastfeeding (babies receiving only breast milk) were 46.3%.

- Infants born to mothers resident in Cork recorded the highest rate of exclusive breastfeeding at 54.9 per cent, with Kilkenny and Dublin County reporting rates at 54.8 per cent and 53.4 per cent respectively.
- Other counties reporting exclusive breastfeeding rates higher than the national rate of 46.3 per cent include Carlow, Waterford, Dublin City, Kerry, Kildare and Meath.


In 2015, 35.5% of babies were breastfed at 3 months (HSE, 2016)


Health and wellbeing is a theme throughout the new National Maternity Strategy 2016-2026: Creating a Better Future Together (DoH, 2016). Breastfeeding is considered important for the health of both mother and baby. A number of initiatives are highlighted within the report to support the improvement of Ireland’s breastfeeding initiation and duration rates.
The National Maternity Strategy 2016-2026 outlines the responsibilities of the Department of Health, HSE and the National Women & Infants Health Programme in relation to the promotion, support of breastfeeding. The National Maternity Strategy actions include improvements in support for breastfeeding both within the hospital and in the community; compliance of all maternity units with the Baby Friendly Health Initiative; implementation of the WHO Code; and breastfeeding promotion campaigns.

These include:

The Department of Health will

- ensure that a health and wellbeing approach underpins both maternity policy and service delivery.
- ensure that the WHO International Code of Marketing of Breast Milk Substitutes and subsequent relevant WHA resolutions are implemented.

The HSE will ensure

- that the Breastfeeding Action Plan 2016-20 is resourced and implemented.

The new National Women and Infants Health Programme will ensure that

- antenatal care encompasses a holistic approach to the woman’s healthcare needs including her physical, social, lifestyle and mental health needs.
- postnatal care promotes health and wellbeing for the new mother and baby, supports breastfeeding and identifies and supports those at risk with a particular emphasis on mental health.
- improved support for breastfeeding is provided both within the hospital and the community.
- all maternity hospitals/units comply with the Baby Friendly Health Initiative.
- breastfeeding promotion campaigns are tailored and targeted to help the wider community to play their role in improving Ireland’s breastfeeding initiation and duration rates and protection.

Consultation is currently underway in regard to The HSE Breastfeeding Action Plan 2016 – 2021. It sets out the priority areas to be addressed over the next 5 years to improve breastfeeding supports, to enable more Irish mothers to breastfeed and to improve health outcomes for mothers and children in Ireland. The actions include the implementation of policies at hospital and community level; investment in breastfeeding training and skills.
development for healthcare staff; the provision of additional lactation specialist posts (CMS / CNS Lactation); and partnership working to promote a culture that accepts and supports breastfeeding.

The Action Plan Consultation process identified the following priorities and areas for improvement:

- Investment in breastfeeding Training for Healthcare Professionals
- Improved staffing and resources for breastfeeding support within maternity services and primary care to ensure timely skilled assistance for mothers
- Implementation of Breastfeeding Policies
- Governance and structures to support breastfeeding
- Implementation of the WHO Code of Marketing of Breast milk Substitutes and subsequent relevant WHA Resolutions
- Revised antenatal education

Current HSE initiatives include the revision of the HSE Infant Feeding Policy for Maternity and Neonatal Services in 2015 which is based on the Baby Friendly 10 Steps to Successful Breastfeeding and is the policy of all 19 maternity units; and the development of a Breastfeeding Policy for all CHO areas in 2015. All 19 maternity units participate in the Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative and there are 9 designated Baby Friendly Hospitals. Breastfeeding is promoted to all expectant mothers in the antenatal period at maternity hospitals and in primary care. Mothers are offered support to breastfeed following birth by midwifery staff and care is provided by public health nurses in the community following discharge from maternity hospital. Over 250 breastfeeding support groups are provided by the HSE and HSE funded voluntary breastfeeding organisations around the country.

The HSE has service agreements with voluntary breastfeeding organisations La Leche League, Cuidiu, Friends of Breastfeeding and Irish Premature Babies as well as the Association of Lactation Consultant in Ireland and the Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative. The HSE launched the first phase of its national breastfeeding campaign ‘Every Breastfeed Makes a Difference’ and delivers an annual National Breastfeeding Week. The HSE website www.breastfeeding.ie is the primary route for providing information, advice and support to women thinking about breastfeeding and those who are breastfeeding. The on-line Ask the Expert service is provided by Lactation Consultants (IBCLCs) who respond to mother’s queries about breastfeeding. Year-round search and display advertising ensures that awareness of the campaign and the call to action to visit the site reaches the target audience.
HSE breastfeeding information materials including the booklet ‘Breastfeeding – a good start in life’ was developed in partnership with Baby Friendly Hospitals Initiative, La Leche League, Association of Lactation Consultants, Cuidiu and Friends of Breastfeeding. It forms part of the HSE Healthy Pregnancy Pack which is distributed widely through maternity hospitals and GP’s and over 80,000 are distributed annually.

The Department of Health and the HSE implement the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes. The Infant and Follow on Formulae regulations are enforced in partnership with the HSE Environmental Health Officers.

The new HSE Nurture Infant Health & Wellbeing Programme will include initiative to increasing the rates and duration of breastfeeding in Ireland, including revising antenatal education; developing pathways of care for mother and baby; and developing staff training.

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