

Breastfeeding in Atlantic Canada

Breast milk is the best food for babies. It has the perfect balance of nutrients, is easy to digest, and adapts to your baby's changing needs. Breast milk also provides protection to your baby against sickness and disease.¹

Canadian and international **guidelines recommend**¹:

- **Starting breastfeeding as soon as possible** after birth, ideally within an hour.
- **Exclusively breastfeeding from birth to 6 months.** This means that baby is only given breast milk to eat (*without any other foods or liquids!*). Baby can still receive vitamins, minerals, or medicine as needed.
- **Continued breastfeeding to 2 years of age and beyond.**



Statistics Canada collects breastfeeding information through the **Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS)**. Breastfeeding questions are asked to individuals who identify as **female, between the ages of 15-55, who gave birth in the past 5 years**. Information from the CCHS is later released in a format called PUMF (Public Use Microdata File).

We used the most recent data (PUMF from 2017-18) to highlight breastfeeding practices in the Atlantic region (Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, and Newfoundland and Labrador) and across Canada.²

Breastfeeding initiation

81%

of caregivers in Atlantic Canada

91%

of caregivers across Canada

Individuals are considered to have initiated breastfeeding if they breastfed or tried to breastfeed their baby at least once.

Exclusive breastfeeding to 6 months

30%

of caregivers in Atlantic Canada

35%

of caregivers across Canada

Some caregivers may introduce solid foods a bit earlier if their baby shows signs of readiness. We found that **38% of participants in the Atlantic region**, compared to 43% nationally, **breastfed exclusively for at least 5 months**.

Caregivers were more likely to exclusively breastfeed if they:

- Were older (30-49 years)
- Were married or common-law
- Had a higher household income
- Had immigrated to Canada
- Had a higher education
- Were not Indigenous
- Were not White



We also learned that participants were **more likely** to exclusively breastfeed if they **had a normal body mass index** entering pregnancy (BMI between 18.5-24.9 kg/m²), **gained the recommended amount of weight during pregnancy**, and **did not smoke during their pregnancy**.

The **average length of breastfeeding**, among caregivers who had ever breastfed:

- 8.3 months (± 7.0 months) in Atlantic Canada
- 9.1 months (± 7.5 months) nationally

Breastfeeding beyond infancy (for 12 months or longer):

24%

of caregivers in Atlantic Canada

31%

of caregivers across Canada



The **top reasons caregivers stopped breastfeeding** in the Atlantic region were:

- 1 They believed they did not have enough breast milk
- 2 Their baby was ready for solid foods
- 3 They returned to work or school
- 4 Their baby weaned him/herself
- 5 They had difficulty with breastfeeding



Across Canada, the reasons caregivers stopped breastfeeding **varied based on the length of time they breastfed.**

Caregivers who **breastfed for less than 6 months** most often stopped breastfeeding because:

- They believed they did not have enough breast milk
- They had difficulty with breastfeeding

Caregivers who **breastfed for 6 months or more** most often stopped breastfeeding because:

- Their baby was ready for solid foods
- Their baby weaned him/herself

Breastfeeding practices have been improving steadily across Canada and in the Atlantic region over the past few decades, **but still remain low.**¹ For example, the World Health Assembly set a target that 50% of the world's children under 6 months be exclusively breastfed by the year 2025,³ but we're still at 30% (Atlantic) or 35% (Canada).²

Given the benefits of breastfeeding for infant health and development, **targeted programs and supports are needed to make exclusive and continued breastfeeding accessible to all women across Canada.**

References:

1. Public Health Agency of Canada (2019). Breastfeeding, in Family-centred maternity and newborn care: National guidelines.
2. Chan *et al.* (2023). *Appl. Physiol. Nutr. Metab.* doi:10.1139/apnm-2022-0333.
3. WHO/UNICEF (2014). Global nutrition targets 2025: Breastfeeding policy brief (WHO/NMH/NHD/14.7).