

INTRODUCTION

Breastfeeding during the first six months of life is widely recognized to be the optimal method of feeding and provides benefits to both the mother and infant. The Breastfeeding Council for Canada¹, the Canadian Pediatric Society² and the World Health Assembly and World Health Organization³, all recommend “exclusive” breastfeeding for at least the first six months of life, with complementary foods being added and breastfeeding continuing for up to two years and beyond.

Breastfeeding reduces maternal anxiety, develops maternal self-esteem, promotes contraction of the uterus, improves bone remineralization and possibly reduces the risk of ovarian cancer.⁴ It also benefits the mother by helping her to lose weight and return to her pre-pregnancy weight more quickly.⁵ Breastfeeding provides optimal nutritional, immunological and emotional benefits for the growth and development of infants.⁶ For example, it provides protection against gastrointestinal and respiratory infections, middle ear infections and possibly enhances cognitive function.

One of the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care’s Mandatory Health Programs and Services Guidelines is “to increase to 50 per cent the percentage of infants breastfed up to six months by the year 2010.”⁷

In 2004/05, Peel Health undertook two telephone surveys of new mothers in the Region of Peel. The study was a follow-up to a 2000 survey that was carried out with the primary purpose of determining the breastfeeding initiation and duration rates in Peel.⁸ The 2004/05 survey tools were also designed to collect information about breastfeeding initiation rates, duration rates and other breastfeeding practices among new mothers when their child was six-months old and again when their child was 12 months old. Demographic information about the mother was also gathered.

In addition, the surveys were designed to gather information about:

- the proportion of women who initiated breastfeeding
- the proportion of women who breastfed their infants to six months and 12 months of age in the Region of Peel
- the proportion of women who breastfed exclusively for specific durations
- factors associated with breastfeeding initiation and duration rates
- reasons for discontinuation of breastfeeding
- awareness of resources for the breastfeeding mother, and usage of those resources
- comfort with breastfeeding in public

- return to work/school after maternity leave

Mothers who never breastfed their infants were also asked questions about their awareness and utilization of resources.