

Victims of violence stop breastfeeding sooner

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Women who have been victims of violence in the previous 12 months are 40 per cent more likely to stop breastfeeding before the baby is four months old, according to a doctoral thesis from NTNU. Credit: Thinkstock

More than two out of ten women who have been victims of sexual abuse as children are likely to stop breastfeeding before their babies reach four months, according to a new study.

In Norway, almost all mothers start with [breastfeeding](#), and full breastfeeding for the first six months of a child's life is recommended. Breast milk contains many antibodies and vitamins not found in [infant formula](#). The emotional intimacy of breastfeeding is important for both mother and child. Breastfeeding is also good for the mother's health.

But some mothers stop breastfeeding early

Of the women who have been victims of [violence](#) in the past 12 months, 40 per cent are more likely to stop breastfeeding before the baby is four months old.

Women who have been exposed to several types of violence, such as sexual and physical abuse, have an almost 50 per cent greater chance of

stopping breastfeeding than those who have not been exposed to violence.

Violence has long-lasting effect

Studies on the relationship between breastfeeding and violence are sparse, but now one of the largest studies internationally has been published about the relationship between violence and lactation.

PhD candidate Marie Flem Sørnbø of NTNU's Department of Public Health and General Practice carried out the study.

"It's important to be aware of the factors that promote breastfeeding, and what causes some women to choose to stop breastfeeding early," she says.

Breach of trust leaves deep scars

Flem Sørnbø has also looked at the relationship between violence women have been subjected to as children and how that can affect breastfeeding as an adult.

"I was surprised that the violence a woman endured as a child would impact breastfeeding so strongly," she said.

Among her findings:

- Women who were subjected to [sexual violence](#) as children are 22 per cent more likely to stop breastfeeding before the baby reaches four months.
- Women who have been subjected to one or more types of violence as children are 41 per cent more likely to stop breastfeeding earlier than four months.
- Among women who have been victims of violence during the past 12 months, 40 per cent are more likely to stop breastfeeding earlier than four months.

- Among women who have been subjected to violence by a person known to them, 28 per cent are more likely to stop breastfeeding earlier than four months.

Almost two out of ten women are victims of violence

Flem Sørnbø used the Norwegian Mother and Child Cohort Study, which involved 95 200 women and was conducted from 1999 to 2008. She used the responses of 53 934 women. Of these, 19 per cent of the women reported that they had been subjected to violence as an adult, and 18 per cent reported that they had been subjected to violence as [children](#).

"It's important for people in general to understand what can influence mothers to stop breastfeeding. But it's especially important for primary physicians, midwives, nurses and gynaecologists who work with pregnant women and mothers. Then they can be more aware and provide better support, so that more women abuse survivors continue to breastfeed," says Flem Sørnbø.

All pregnant women will be asked about violence

In 2015, the Norwegian Directorate of Health implemented new guidelines for maternity care. Now all midwives, doctors and nurses ask [pregnant women](#) whether they have been exposed to violence. This information is important for detecting postpartum depression and to help more [women](#) to breastfeed.

More information: Marie Flem Sørnbø et al. Past and recent abuse is associated with early cessation of breast feeding: results from a large prospective cohort in Norway, *BMJ Open* (2015). [DOI: 10.1136/bmjopen-2015-009240](#)

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