

'Breast is best' message under fire

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Current promotional and educational programs which describe breastfeeding as 'best' are undermining women's capacity to make informed decisions about infant feeding, according to an article published by a University of Wollongong doctoral student in the latest issue of *Maternal and Child Nutrition*.

Ms Nina Berry from UOW's Centre for Health Initiatives was joint author of a report with Karleen Gribble from the University of Western Sydney called "Breast is no longer best: promoting normal infant feeding". Breastfeeding is not 'best', say the authors, it is simply the normal way to feed human infants.

The article suggested that breastfeeding promotion and education programs should abandon the 'breast is best' message because it is misleading and fails to communicate the importance of breastfeeding.

"In fact, these messages may have obscured the importance of breastfeeding to infant and maternal health and the well-established risks associated with early weaning from breastfeeding," Ms Berry said. "To say that 'breast is best' is to suggest that what breastfeeding offers is a handful of optional bonuses and that formula-fed infants are the normal standard for comparison. In fact, human babies were designed to be fed human milk."

"Research has found that while most people accept that breastfed babies are healthier, they do not understand that this means that formula-fed babies are likely to be sicker. Because formula feeding is viewed as harmless, women are not getting the support they need to continue breastfeeding and to make informed choices about infant feeding. This misunderstanding demonstrates the failure of the 'breast is best' message and the need to rethink breastfeeding promotion", she said.

The paper in *Maternal and Child Nutrition* also illuminates an important addition to the body of evidence pointing to the significance of using breastfed babies as the control group when conducting research.

The World Health Organisation (WHO)'s Multicenter Growth Reference study found that the growth of formula-fed babies deviated from that of breastfed babies and that using growth charts based on formula-fed babies could be contributing to the current obesity epidemic.

The use of formula-fed babies in control groups makes it difficult for readers to see that formula-fed babies are at increased risk of adverse health outcomes, Ms Berry said.

The WHO recommends that children are breastfed for up to two years or more and that they should not be given any food or drink other than breast milk for the first six months of their lives.

"It takes a great deal of support for mothers to reach these goals. However, mothers are not being provided with adequate support because the risks associated with early introduction of foods other than human milk are not well understood by health professionals. Furthermore, many health professionals are reluctant to talk to mothers about risks because they do not want to make mothers feel guilty. This is not about guilt. It is about a mother's right to have all the information she needs to make an informed choice about how she should feed her baby – it is about ensuring that mothers have the support they need," Ms Berry said.

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Note: Original news release can be found [here](#).