About this release

This release from the Information Services Division (ISD) provides an update of infant feeding statistics including data for babies born in the financial year 2016/17.

Encouraging and supporting breastfeeding is an important public health activity. There is good evidence that breastfeeding protects the health of children and mothers. Breastfeeding rates in Scotland are monitored and published annually.

Main Points

- Among babies born in Scotland in 2016/17, 63% had been breastfed for at least some time after birth, and 41% were being breastfed by 6-8 weeks of age.

- Breastfeeding rates in Scotland are low compared to those in other countries worldwide. The proportion of babies who were breastfed for at least some time has increased in Scotland over recent years, and there has been a slight increase in the proportion of babies breastfed for at least 6 weeks after birth.

- Breastfeeding is much more common among older mothers. 56% of mothers aged 40 or over were breastfeeding at the 6-8 week review compared to 12% of mothers aged under 20.

- White Scottish babies are less likely to be breastfed than babies from any other ethnic group.
Background

Breastfeeding provides the best nutrition for babies and young children and supports children’s health in the short and longer term. Current guidance recommends that babies should receive just breast milk for the first 6 months of life then, after introduction of solid foods, should continue to breastfeed up to their second birthday or for as long as the mother and baby wish.

There is strong evidence that breastfeeding reduces children’s risk of gut, chest, and ear infections and leads to a small but significant improvement in brain development and IQ. Breastfeeding also benefits mothers’ health, with strong evidence that it reduces the risk of breast and ovarian cancer, and some evidence that it may also promote maternal healthy weight and reduce the risk of Type 2 diabetes. The benefits of breastfeeding for both baby and mother are seen across the world, including in high income countries such as Scotland.

Breastfeeding rates in Scotland are low. Improving breastfeeding rates would help to improve the health of babies and mothers, and reduce inequalities in health.

There is good evidence that interventions can work to improve breastfeeding rates. Overall, it is likely that comprehensive approaches that consider a wide range of issues will be most effective. Interventions within the health service, such as ensuring the availability and quality of breastfeeding support for new mothers, are important. Equally, wider interventions, such as restricting the inappropriate promotion of formula milk and ensuring supportive employment policies that allow women to continue to breastfeed after returning to work, will also be required.

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Find out more

Find out more in the Infant Feeding Statistics Financial Year 2016/17 report, and in the interactive data visualisation. Background information and metadata can be found in the technical report.

ISD publishes a wide range of information on infant feeding, maternal and child health. Further information is available on our website

The next release of this publication will be in October 2018.

ISD and Official Statistics

Information Services Division (ISD) is the principal and authoritative source of statistics on health and care services in Scotland. ISD is designated by legislation as a producer of ‘Official Statistics’. Our official statistics publications are produced to a high professional standard and comply with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics. Further information about our statistics.