

# Breastfeeding Policy Background

## Introduction

The provincial Breastfeeding Policy comes into effect on February 27, 2023 and supports health care providers across the continuum of care to implement standardized, evidence-informed practices and key messages to enhance parents' confidence and self-efficacy to meet their breastfeeding goals.

This Policy is a key component of the *Alberta Health Services (AHS) Provincial Breastfeeding Strategy*. The Policy was developed in collaboration with the AHS Provincial Breastfeeding Committee. The committee members include AHS provincial and zone leaders and subject matter experts who represent the maternal and child health continuum and breastfeeding, as well as representation from Alberta Health and the University of Calgary.

To learn more about this new Policy and access supporting education, resources and documents, visit [ahs.ca/hcpbreastfeeding](https://ahs.ca/hcpbreastfeeding)

## Why this Policy was Developed

Breastfeeding is recognized as a key public health priority that provides benefits for the growth and development of infants, improvement of maternal health, provision of economic benefits to the family and the healthcare system, and is strongly supported provincially, nationally and internationally.

Despite this strong support, breastfeeding rates in Alberta, Canada and other industrialized countries see large decreases following initiation. In Alberta, there are also large variations in rates across the province, as well as varied clinical and public health breastfeeding practices within each zone, indicating a need for standardized province-wide guidance, education, and training of healthcare staff, as well as consistent support for parents and their families.

The Breastfeeding Policy emphasizes organizational commitment to breastfeeding in a tangible and visible way, and in doing so, stimulates, complements, and reinforces other health promotion strategies that are being implemented as part of the *AHS Breastfeeding Strategy*. The Policy and supporting staff and parent education resources also help to standardize evidence-informed practices across the maternal and child continuum of care within AHS from preconception, postpartum to the early years of life.

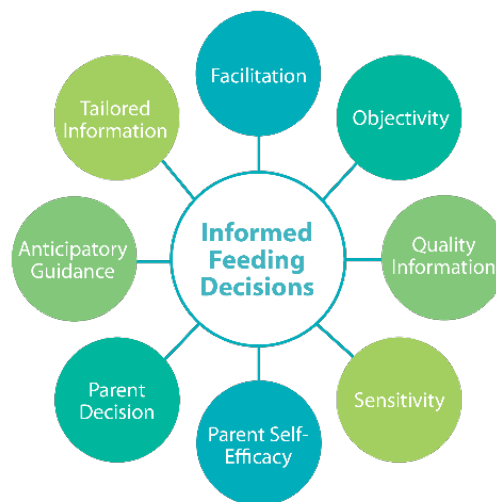
## Informed Feeding Decisions

A key element in the Policy, *Informed Feeding Decisions (IFD) Definition and Approach* was developed based on a review of evidence, which included literature on decision-making models in

health care, parent perceptions and experiences of support, and the use of risk language. The [AHS 20-Hour Breastfeeding Course](#) includes a module dedicated to explaining and applying the IFD approach to practice.

Unlike most existing models that support infant and child feeding decisions, Informed Feeding Decisions:

- **Uses a principles approach that can be applied across the continuum of care and practice areas.** Principles can be adapted to a variety of contexts. Principles are non-linear, allowing the health care provider to meet the parent where they are at.
- **Includes a more comprehensive understanding of feeding options.** In addition to exclusive breastfeeding and exclusive formula feeding, there are other options for parents in Alberta to consider. It is important to provide parents with accurate and objective information on feeding options which include:
  - Breastfeeding at the breast
  - Breastmilk feeding (parent's own expressed breastmilk, donor human milk, shared breastmilk)
  - Formula feeding
  - Mixed feeding (a combination of feeding options that includes breastmilk and formula)
- **Incorporates a focus on support for continued breastfeeding.** Informed Feeding Decisions recognizes that parents make feeding decisions throughout the continuum of care, from pregnancy through to the early years. Anticipatory guidance is used to help breastfeeding parents meet their feeding goals and feel confident in their decisions. This includes the provision of realistic information on expected infant and child behaviours, common feeding challenges and potential strategies to address them.
- **Supports being sensitive to parent vulnerability.** Feeding support often takes place during vulnerable times when parents may experience increased sensitivity and decreased coping skills. Parents benefit from support that considers verbal and non-verbal communication, the use of risk language, and potential feelings of guilt and shame—regardless of their feeding decision.



## Policy Supports the Baby-Friendly Initiative

Policy development is the first key step in the Breastfeeding Committee for Canada (BCC) [Baby Friendly Initiative 10 Steps and WHO Code Outcome Indicators for Hospitals and Community Health Services](#), which adapt the international standards from the [World Health Organization/UNICEF Ten Steps for Successful Breastfeeding](#) to a Canadian context.

Supporting staff education resources will address each of the BCC Baby-Friendly Initiative (BFI) Ten Steps. For facilities that currently have BFI designation, this Policy continues to support that designation.

The World Health Organization's *International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes* is addressed through several key considerations within the Breastfeeding Policy and within staff education. The considerations are included in the document *The International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes Alberta Health Services Considerations*. This document was developed in collaboration with the Provincial Breastfeeding Committee, Nutrition Services and other areas such as Policy and Forms, Contracting Procurement and Supply Management, and Communications.

## Staff Education Resources to Support the Policy

The following staff education resources can be accessed through [ahs.ca/hcpbreastfeeding](https://ahs.ca/hcpbreastfeeding)

- AHS 20-Hour Breastfeeding Course is in development, with six modules now available:
  - *Positive Breastfeeding Support*
  - *Informed Feeding Decisions*
  - *Including Partners & Supporters*
  - *Introduction to Breastmilk & Breastfeeding*
  - *Breastfeeding Support Skills & Assessment*
  - *Variations & Challenges for the Breastfeeding Parent*
  - *Variations & Challenges for the Breastfeeding Infant (available in 2024)*
  - *Breastmilk Expression & Supplementary Feeding (available in 2024)*
  - *Practices that Support Breastfeeding (available in 2025)*
  - *Breastfeeding Transitions (available in 2025)*
  - *Breastfeeding Support for Preterm & Sick Infants (available in 2025)*
- AHS Online Breastfeeding Module
  - *Breastfeeding Challenges and Supplementation*

The 20-Hour Breastfeeding Course will improve accessibility and uptake of staff breastfeeding education in Alberta through:

- Online availability, removing the need for travel or time off to attend in-person education
- No cost, removing any financial barriers due to registration fees or travel
- Open registration for all health care providers in Alberta, not just health authority staff
- Self-paced learning, as each course module is 1-3 hours in length and can be completed as the learner has time
- Continuing Medical Education accreditation to fulfill professional continuing education requirements and attract physician learners

## Parent Resources to Support the Policy

Parent education resources to support breastfeeding can be accessed through [healthyparentshealthychildren.ca](https://healthyparentshealthychildren.ca).

For parents who cannot breastfeed or have made the decision not to breastfeed, HPHC includes information applicable to all feeding decisions, such as skin-to-skin care, cue-based feeding, and rooming-in. Information on the safe use of other feeding options (e.g., pasteurized donor human milk or commercial infant formula) and methods (e.g., bottle feeding) is also provided in alignment with the Informed Feeding Decisions approach.