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Changing Disparities in Breast Feeding

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The California Department of Public Health says almost all mothers in the state try breastfeeding their babies early on.

But a much lower percentage exclusively breastfeed their infants in the hospital, and the numbers drop even more for women of color.

Some say hospital policies could be a key to change that. Others believe cultural factors play a bigger role.

This is a report for *California Healthline*, a daily news service of the California HealthCare Foundation. I'm Kenny Goldberg.

Robbie Gonzalez-Dow heads up the California Breastfeeding Coalition.

She says hospital practices are critical to determining whether moms exclusively breastfeed their babies.

(Gonzalez-Dow): "Such as putting the baby immediately skin-to-skin after birth, rooming in, not using artificial nipples or pacifiers, not supplementing babies with formula. These practices make a difference."

Hospitals no longer routinely give new moms formula to take home with them, but that's just a first step, says San Diego neonatologist Nancy Wight. She says most women come into the hospital intending to exclusively breastfeed their baby -- and hospital nurses who get special training can offer the right kind of support.

(Wight): "So that they are less likely to offer formula unnecessarily, and much more likely to be hands on in terms of helping mothers position babies, get them latched on properly and to deal with small problems as they occur."

But there's a limit to the impact hospitals can have on breastfeeding, says Jan Emerson-Shea, vice president of external affairs at the California Hospital Association.

(Emerson-Shea): "The women who deliver the babies are in the hospitals generally about 12 hours, so it's really something that we have very little influence over."

Emerson-Shea says breastfeeding is heavily influenced by cultural factors and by conversations a woman has with her physician in the months leading up to her delivery.

(Emerson-Shea): "Hospital staff can be helpful, and we certainly want to be helpful, but the decision whether she's going to breastfeed or not is typically made long before she comes to the hospital to deliver."

The California Department of Public Health tracks breastfeeding rates by hospital and ethnicity. The latest report reveals in 2014, more than 80% of white women exclusively breastfed their infants in the hospital. That rate fell to 62% of Latino women and 56% among African-American moms.

Monique Sims-Harper is a certified lactation consultant and manager of the Women and Infant Children program in Contra Costa County.

She says the low breastfeeding rate among African-Americans is primarily due to a lack of role models.

(Sims-Harper): "In order to actually breastfeed, you need to have learned it from, let's say your mom or your grandmother, and also had a tremendous amount of support from the father of your baby."

She believes because breastfeeding doesn't hold such high importance in their culture, African-American women aren't exposed to it as much.

(Sims-Harper): "And so their initiation and their duration are affected by a loss of that art of breastfeeding and how you incorporate it into just normal, everyday activities."

Gonzalez-Dow says there are different barriers for Latino women.

For instance, she says many Latino women lack a major benefit that can make it easier on new moms.

(Gonzalez-Dow): "They don't have maternity leave. So they're already thinking about going back to work, who's going to take care of their baby, how's my baby going to be fed?"

And Gonzalez-Dow points out that, even though California law requires it, many employers don't offer women a private place to pump their breast milk.

So formula becomes a popular option.

But even given the importance of those cultural factors, hospital practices are crucial, according to the World Health Organization.

In 1991, the agency launched its Baby-Friendly Hospital initiative, a program that encourages hospitals to take 10 specific steps to promote and support breastfeeding.

The group says mothers who give birth at baby-friendly hospitals are more likely to initiate exclusive breastfeeding and more likely to sustain it for six months.

In 2014, California lawmakers approved a measure that requires all maternity hospitals to become baby-friendly by 2025, and that's a big step, says Nancy Wight.

(Wight): "Breastfeeding is increasing worldwide. And I think in California, we are doing very well, but we still have a ways to go."

So far, 78 hospitals and birth centers in the state have earned the baby-friendly designation. That represents 31% of all such facilities in California.

This has been a report for *California Healthline*, a daily news service of the California HealthCare Foundation.

If you have feedback or other issues you'd like to have addressed, please email us at CHL@CHCF.org. I'm Kenny Goldberg. Thanks for listening.