



## Information Sheet on

### Infant Feeding for Women Who Were Sexually Abused in Childhood

#### Background

Violence against girls and women is a broad social problem. In a 2005 study of women who were sexually abused in childhood and their experiences with infant feeding, women identified some important issues. The following are some of the key points that were learned from the research:

For many women, the experience of childhood sexual abuse (CSA) has a lifelong impact, and may affect infant feeding practices. Breastfeeding or seeing other women breastfeeding may trigger sudden intense emotional memories of abuse. Sexual abuse in childhood affects every woman differently. The birth of a child, and the breastfeeding experience, has for many women been a negative experience. For other women, it has been a healing experience.

Many women are not aware of the impact sexual abuse in childhood has on them. In fact there are many women who don't remember being sexually abused until a significant life event such as the birth of a child. Some women who experienced childhood sexual abuse coped with the abuse by learning to dissociate and disconnect from their bodies. The breastfeeding experience may be particularly difficult for them.

How a woman survivor of CSA responds to nursing depends partly on whether breasts played a part in her abuse, her stage of recovery and healing, the modeling of breastfeeding she experienced growing up, and the nursing support she received. Issues such as breastfeeding in public and the use of breast pumps may be particularly difficult for her.

Some women found that even when they believed breastfeeding was the best choice for their baby's health and development, and wanted to breastfeed, they had difficulty. As a result, they used breast milk substitutes instead of their own breast milk, and felt disappointed or that they had failed.

A woman has a choice in how she feeds her infant. Some women might not want to breastfeed their children, might feel ambiguous about breastfeeding, or might be repulsed by the idea of breastfeeding. It is important for all women to know that they are not a failure because of their choice in infant feeding.

Some women wished they had been informed and encouraged more to breastfeed before being directed to bottle feed. One research participant stated: *I sometimes see moms nursing and holding babies and just having that total closeness, the physical closeness with the baby, and I wanted that so much.*



## What Do You Need to Know?

In addition to the health benefits of breastfeeding, the experience of breastfeeding may be an opportunity for healing. If you are expecting a child, you were sexually abused in childhood, and you are considering breastfeeding, we encourage you to explore your experiences and feelings about breastfeeding, prior to the baby's birth.

Professional support people like doctors, nurses or lactation consultants, may not know you have experienced abuse. Whether or not you choose to disclose your history of abuse to these people, you have choices in how to make sure your experience with them is the best it can be.

- You are not alone. Know who to contact for support. Bring a support person, or someone you trust, with you for appointments if you find it helpful.
- Let the professional know in advance that it is important to you to know when they will be touching you, and that they will stop if you ask.
- If you are uncomfortable disrobing, ask them what options you have.
- Tell them to explain process before acting: "This is what I am going to do next."
- Inform them that you want to have some control over the situation.
- Know that you have the right to stop anything you are uncomfortable with, and to say no to anything, including breastfeeding. If a professional is not respectful of your body and your needs, you have a right to seek support elsewhere.
- Ask for written information about breastfeeding. Ask for information on more positions for feeding comfortably.
- If there is something that helps you stay grounded, or relaxed, like some favorite music or a stuffed animal, let them know that you would like to use it or have it with you.
- Ask for privacy if you need it; let them know if you would prefer to be alone or with others when you are receiving help.
- If you ignore or are supersensitive to pain, try to let the professional know.

*This information sheet is based on the 2005 study "From Hurting Touch to Healing Touch: The Infant Feeding Experiences of Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse (CSA)" by Penny Van Esterik and Karen Wood. This research was completed in partnership with the National Network on Environments and Women's Health (NNEWH). NNEWH is financed through a contribution agreement with the Bureau of Women's Health and Gender Analysis, Health Canada. The views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the official views of NNEWH or Health Canada.*

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