

# HealthPartners recognized as a “breastfeeding supportive workplace”

When Annelise Heitkamp returned to work after her first child, the new mother was often traveling between sites in her role as a communications manager. HealthPartners helped ease her transition with dedicated lactation rooms in many of the companies’ hospitals, clinics and administrative buildings. Heitkamp could just sign up through Outlook, arranging a time that corresponded both with her work schedule and the time she needed to pump.

As an integrated health care system and health insurance provider, HealthPartners promotes policies and practices that support lactation\* given the proven and lifelong health benefits of human milk for infants and mothers, and the positive benefits to the environment. Human milk provides the ideal nutrition for infants and contains antibodies to help fight off viruses and bacteria. Research shows infants that consume human milk have a lowered risk of diabetes, obesity and certain cancers. Some studies also link feeding human milk to higher IQ scores.

For Heitkamp, her employer’s support meant she was able to continue to provide her milk for her daughter, even after she returned to work.

“Overall, I was excited to be back with my colleagues doing a job I love,” said Heitkamp. “But I was concerned about whether I was going to be able to continue nursing. Having the lactation support made a difference.”

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) and the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists strongly recommend exclusively feeding human milk (no formula, juice or water) to infants until they are six months old. AAP also recommends continuing to feed infants human milk even after the introduction of food and until the baby reaches one year. The World Health Organization encourages parents to continue feeding human milk along with other foods until the infant is two years of age. In order to continue to have an adequate supply of human milk once returning to work, working mothers need to express milk every two or three hours.

## Strong lactation policies boosts retention

Building a supportive lactation environment benefits both new mothers and the company. The reality is that the companies that create a supportive culture for continued

lactation help both new mothers and families, and the company. Studies have shown that companies with lactation support programs lead to higher retention rates among their maternity workforce; one Midwest bank showed a retention rate of 83% compared to the national average of only 59%.

Additionally, studies have shown that a company’s choice to provide enhanced lactation support also translates into higher job satisfaction, improved morale, and better productivity. (See [The business case for breastfeeding for business managers](#)).

“Returning to work is a significant transition for mothers who are nursing and being able to continue to breastfeed is important to many of them,” said Donna Zimmerman, senior vice president of government and community relations. “We know the benefits of breastfeeding from a health and well-being perspective for both the mother and infant so we want to do everything we can to support our employees in this way.”

Zimmerman is a member of the Itasca Project’s First 1000 Days task force and a key HealthPartners leader behind the [Little Moments Count](#) social movement, a statewide initiative to help parents and the community understand the importance of talking, playing, reading and singing early and often with children. Little Moments Count is a



cross-sector collaborative of organizations focused on reaching parents broadly across cultural communities with an aim to promote wellness and equity.

### **Exceeding the standards to best support nursing families**

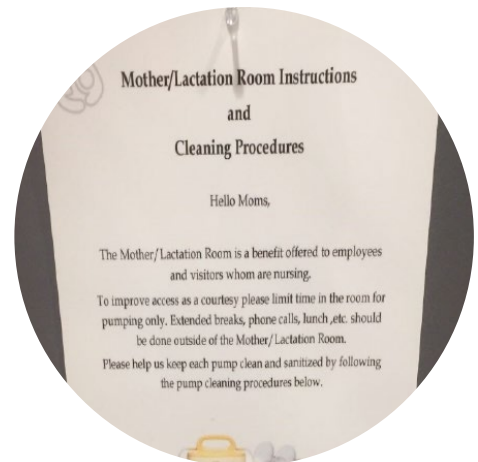
Milk supply often diminishes when mothers are expressing milk with a breast pump versus their infant directly. To combat this situation, HealthPartners has purchased hospital-grade breast pumps in many of the lactation rooms. Hospital-grade pumps have a more powerful motor for suction than personal pumps, and therefore are more efficient and effective. Then, the company provides each employee with a personal use kit required for using the hospital-grade pumps, as well as proper cleaning ensuring safety between employees.

“When I returned to work, one of our ‘breastfeeding champions’ met with me to explain the support resources and to give me the breast pump components,” said Heitkamp. “Having access to a hospital-grade pump at each site meant I didn’t have to carry around a breast pump and could spend less time pumping. That convenience was extremely helpful as I was transitioning back to work. It was one thing I didn’t need to worry about.”

Some of the lactation rooms also have comfortable chairs or couches, paper towels, a sink, a refrigerator and a table. It’s a quiet and relaxing space for nursing mothers to come to express milk for their infants. The resources far exceed what is standard or required. Minnesota state law requires that employers provide nursing mothers with a private room or other location for milk expression, other than a bathroom or toilet stall. The room must have an electrical outlet and be near the worksite. By state law, employers also must provide nursing mothers with reasonable unpaid break time to express milk.

HealthPartners’ policies and practices led to its recognition as a “breastfeeding supportive workplace” by the State of Minnesota and the City of Bloomington.

For additional information see: [4 Easy Ways Employers Can Support New Mothers In The Workplace \(forbes.com\)](#) or the [National Business Group on Health: Investing in Workplace Breastfeeding Programs and Policies](#).



*\*There is an emerging dialogue to call nursing a baby “breastfeeding/chestfeeding” instead of “breastfeeding” to be more inclusive, as mothers are not the only ones who can lactate and nourish their children. Some employers prefer to say “lactation,” as this is also considered to be a more inclusive, but also clinical term.*