

Maternal and Child Health: Cultural Breastfeeding Practices in Minnesota

Benefits of Breastfeeding

Breast milk has been the traditional first food for American Indian/Alaska Native babies since time immemorial. Today, as Tribal nations assert their sovereignty in the realm of food systems they are reclaiming the use of traditional foods to nourish the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of the human body and community. The benefits of breastfeeding are profound and include: increased connection and bonding between mother and baby; reduced risk of certain cancers for women who breastfeed; and reduced risk of ear infections and obesity for breastfed children.¹ Western research suggests what American Indian/Alaska Natives have known for millennia, that the bond between a mother and her child is sacred and this form of bonding leads to healthy child development and subsequently, healthy communities.

Traditional Breastfeeding Practices

The birth of a child is seen as more than a medical procedure – the giving of life and walking into motherhood is a spiritual ceremony. There is an acknowledgement that a spirit entering the physical world requires offerings of tobacco, and prayers and songs to be said and sung to welcome this life.²

Ojibwe babies were breastfed immediately after birth, which indicates that Ojibwe mothers knew about the importance of colostrum in infant health, and babies were breastfed on demand. Ojibwe elders also believe that breastmilk can pass certain characteristics, strengths, and even a sense of respect to babies. An Ojibwe traditional educator shared a traditional view on breast milk that highlights its medicinal qualities: “Breast milk is a gift and a medicine a mother gives her child.”³

Traditionally, Dakota infants are placed on a cradleboard and brought everywhere with their mother. This closeness, along with breastfeeding, provided the ability to develop an attachment that was “very strong and secure.”⁴

A Dakota midwife shares the experiences and views that elders hold: “by way of teachings, what I think is by far the most important one is that having been breastfed as infants and young children is something that elders brag about.” Being nursed by one’s mother has been viewed as a great honor, and the mark of a beloved child to have never been denied the breast. Dakota women have been known for their modesty and openly nursing a child has not been something that would ever be considered immodest. It was also common for children to be nursed through age four.⁵



The Great Lakes Inter-Tribal Epidemiology Center (GLITEC) welcomes discussion with Bemidji Area communities’ health staff in the use of this fact sheet to support assessment, planning, and evaluation functions. Please contact us to discuss how we may support your community.



Breastfeeding Words and Phrases in Anishinaabemowin and Dakota

Anishinaabemowin ⁶		
Giwii-noonaawas ina ondaadiziikeyan? – Are you gonna breastfeed when you have your baby?		
Eya' niwii-noonaawas – Yes, I'm going to breastfeed.		
<i>Noonaawasowin & Noobaajigewin Ikidowinan – Nursing and Breastfeeding Words</i>		
Doodooshaaboo – Milk	Ndoodooshim – My breast/nipple	Megade' – Burp h/!
Noozh gibiibiiyim – Breastfeed your baby	Noobaajige' – Bottle feed h/!	Nawadanjige – S/he latches on
Ninoonaawas – I breastfeed	Noobaajigan – A baby's bottle (with nipple)	Ninawadamig – S/he is latched on to me.
Apane nooni – S/he nurses a lot at one time.	Ninoobaajige'aa – I bottle-feed h/!	Nooni – S/he nurses.
Omooday – A bottle (without a nipple)	Oshtigwaaniwang noobaajigan – A bottle's nipple	Awanzhish gidaa-gojichige ji-noonaawasoyan – You should keep trying to breastfeed
Giwii-noon ina – Do you wanna eat?	Giwii-doodooshike ina – Do you wanna nurse?	Mooshkinebiawan odoodooshiman – My breasts are full
Dakota ^{5,7}		
Aziŋkhiye/a (vcaus+2) –To breastfeed sb, to nurse (as a mother her child)	Azé (n.) – Woman's breast;	
Aziŋkičhiya (vpos+2) – To nurse one's own (child)	Aziŋ (vi+1) – To nurse, to suck milk from a mother's breast	
Wičháaze (n.) – The human breast (of a female)	Máma (n.) – Mother's breast, mother's milk, nursing milk; nursing	
Çiŋkši aziŋwaŋiye ye – I nursed my son	Škabyeda aziŋ – To make a slurping sound while nursing	
Çiŋkši aziŋ ye – My son nursed.	"Mimi" is the term young children use when they want to nurse.	

References: 1) AMERICAN ACADEMY OF PEDIATRICS., POLICY STATEMENT: BREASTFEEDING AND THE USE OF HUMAN MILK (March 2012) (Organizational Principles to Guide and Define the Child Health Care System and/or Improve the Health of all Children), available at <https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/pediatrics/129/3/e827.full.pdf>. 2) Interview with Doreen Day, Ojibwe Midwife. "Native American Women Reclaiming Natural Birth", Wisconsin Public Radio. January 19, 2018. 3) Dodgson J., & Struthers R., Traditional Breastfeeding Practices of the Ojibwe of Northern Minnesota. *Health Care Women Int.* 2003; 24(1): 49-61. doi: 10.1080/07399330304018. 4) U.S. Department of Agriculture. *The Dakota Indian Family*. By Vernon D. Malan. Available at <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED128109.pdf> 5) Interview with Autumn Cavender-Wilson, Wahpetuwan Dakota Midwife from Pezihutazizi K'api Makoce (Upper Sioux Community) (March, 20, 2019). 6) Ojibwemotaadidaa Gidakiiminaang Omaa. (2018). *Noonaawasowin & Noobaajigewin, Breast-feeding & Bottle-feeding*. 7) Williamson, J. P., & Schommer, C. I. (1992). *An English-Dakota dictionary*. St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society.