Victims of violence stop breastfeeding sooner

One in four women who have been victims of violence as adults is at risk of stopping breastfeeding before the baby is four months old.

More than two out of ten women who have been victims of sexual abuse as children are likely to stop breastfeeding before their babies reach four months, according to a new study.

In Norway, almost all mothers start with breastfeeding, and full breastfeeding for the first six months is recommended. Breast milk contains many antibodies and vitamins not found in infant formula. The emotional intimacy of breastfeeding is important for both mother and child. Breastfeeding is also good for the mother’s health.

But some mothers stop breastfeeding early.

Of the women who have been victims of violence in the past 12 months, 40 per cent are more likely to stop breastfeeding before the baby is four months old.

Women who have been exposed to several types of violence, such as sexual and physical, have an almost 50 per cent greater chance of stopping breastfeeding than those who have not been exposed to violence.

Violence has long-lasting effect

Studies on the relationship between breastfeeding and violence are sparse, but now one of the largest studies internationally has been published about the relationship between violence and lactation.

PhD candidate Marie Flem Sørbø of NTNU’s Department of Public Health and General Practice carried out the study.

“It’s important to be aware of the factors that promote breastfeeding, and what causes some women to choose to stop breastfeeding early,” she says.

Breach of trust leaves deep scars

Flem Sørbø has also looked at the relationship between violence women have been subjected to as children and how that can affect breastfeeding as an adult.

“I was surprised that the violence a woman endured as a child would impact breastfeeding so strongly,” she said.

Among her findings:

- Women who were subjected to sexual violence as children are 22 per cent more likely to stop breastfeeding before the baby reaches four months.
Women who have been subjected to one or more types of violence as children are 41 per cent more likely to stop breastfeeding earlier than four months. Among women who have been victims of violence during the past 12 months, 40 per cent are more likely to stop breastfeeding earlier than four months. Among women who have been subjected to violence by a person known to them, 28 per cent are more likely to stop breastfeeding earlier than four months. Almost two out of ten women are victims of violence.

Flem Sørbø used the Norwegian Mother and Child Cohort Study, which involved 95,200 women and was conducted from 1999 to 2008. She used the responses of 53,934 women. Of these, 19 per cent of the women reported that they had been subjected to violence as an adult, and 18 per cent reported that they had been subjected to violence as children.

“It’s important for people in general to understand what can influence mothers to stop breastfeeding. But it’s especially important for primary physicians, midwives, nurses and gynaecologists who work with pregnant women and mothers. Then they can be more aware and provide better support, so that more women abuse survivors continue to breastfeed,” says Flem Sørbø.

All pregnant women will be asked about violence

In 2015, the Norwegian Directorate of Health implemented new guidelines for maternity care. Now all midwives, doctors and nurses ask pregnant women whether they have been exposed to violence.

This information is important for detecting postpartum depression and to help more women to breastfeed.

Marie Flem Sørbø is also a physician in the Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation at Ålesund Hospital in Møre og Romsdal county.

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