



# Western Upper Peninsula Health Department **BREASTFEEDING**



## HOW CULTURE INFLUENCES BREASTFEEDING: TRADITIONS, BELIEFS & SUPPORT

*Breastfeeding is universal—but how it's practiced, supported, and even viewed can vary greatly depending on culture, community, and tradition. Understanding cultural influences on breastfeeding helps us become more empathetic, informed, and supportive—both as individuals and as a broader community.*

### In many cultures, breastfeeding is deeply rooted in tradition:

- In Nigeria, new mothers often follow a period of postpartum seclusion ("omugwo") where elder women help care for both mother and baby—supporting rest and exclusive breastfeeding.
- In Japan, breastfeeding is common and supported, but modesty is emphasized. Many mothers prefer to nurse privately or use nursing covers, even though public breastfeeding is legal.
- In Indigenous communities across North America, breastfeeding is traditionally viewed as a sacred act, often accompanied by teachings passed down through grandmothers or clan mothers.
- In Scandinavian countries like Norway and Sweden, high breastfeeding rates are supported by robust maternity leave policies, baby-friendly hospitals, and cultural norms that strongly encourage breastfeeding.



*Always remember you can ask for help by contacting your local WIC agency or breastfeeding peer support person  
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## Cultural Barriers to Breastfeeding:

While some traditions support breastfeeding beautifully, others can present challenges:

- In some cultures, colostrum is considered “dirty” or “old milk” and is discarded, delaying the baby’s first feed.
- Shame or modesty around public breastfeeding—even in places where it’s legally protected—can discourage mothers from nursing on the go.
- Western beauty standards and pressure to “bounce back” postpartum may lead some new mothers to stop breastfeeding early due to concerns about body image.
- In communities with a history of medical racism or colonialism, there may be mistrust toward healthcare systems that now encourage breastfeeding—especially when past generations were discouraged or even punished for doing so.

## Why This Matters:

When we understand the cultural lens through which someone views breastfeeding, we can:

- Offer nonjudgmental support
- Create inclusive environments
- Help bridge the gap between tradition and evidence-based practices
- Celebrate breastfeeding in all its forms—from chestfeeding to combo-feeding, and everything in between

Breastfeeding isn’t just biological—it’s also cultural. By recognizing the rich diversity in how families feed and nurture their babies, we can move toward a more compassionate, inclusive world where all parents feel seen, supported, and empowered.



## How you can help:

- Ask, don’t assume. “What does breastfeeding look like in your family or culture?” is a respectful starting point.
- Share stories. Diverse representation of breastfeeding experiences matters—especially in books, clinics, and social media.
- Advocate for access. Not everyone gets equal support. Push for lactation help, parental leave, and culturally competent care.

**Whether you’ve already spoken with family or friends or are just looking for extra support, we encourage you to reach out to your local Health Department to connect with your Breastfeeding Peer Support person. We’re here to help, listen, and support your goals without judgment. Let’s reach them together!**

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