

FACT SHEET

Important Legislation to Improve Coverage of Breastfeeding Benefits for Military Women

July 2014

Senator McCaskill and Representative Capps recently proposed legislation that would require the TRICARE program to cover breastfeeding supplies and education to military women and women in military families. These proposals would ensure that military families have breastfeeding coverage that is similar to the coverage provided in most private health plans.

Lack of Comprehensive Breastfeeding Benefits in TRICARE Coverage

Breastfeeding benefits the mother and the child, but too often there is a gap between women's desire to breastfeed their children and the support they need to successfully breastfeed. Although a majority of women plan to breastfeed, a much lower proportion actually do when they are discharged from the hospital or other facility after delivery.¹

The vast majority of private health insurance plans now cover breast pumps and education to help women initiate and continue breastfeeding. However, military women are not entitled to comprehensive breastfeeding benefits because TRICARE—the Department of Defense health care program—is not required to provide this important coverage.

TRICARE serves approximately 9.7 million Active Duty Service members, National Guard and Reserve members, retirees, their families, survivors, and certain former spouses.² Over 4.7 million women are eligible for coverage through TRICARE, and over 1.63 million women are of reproductive age.³ TRICARE only covers breast pumps for mothers of premature infants, and that coverage ends once the infant is discharged from the hospital, unless the woman obtains a "physician-documented medical reason."⁴ TRICARE explicitly excludes coverage of breast pumps "when used for reasons of personal convenience...even if prescribed by a physician."⁵

The Institute of Medicine has identified access to breast pumps and instruction in breastfeeding as critical factors that influence whether a woman initiates breastfeeding and the duration of breastfeeding. Most pregnant women in the United States intend to breastfeed their infants and initiate breastfeeding at birth, but the majority of these women stop breastfeeding while their child is still an infant. Results from a 2004 study of military women found 51 percent of mothers breastfeeding at 6 months, and 25 percent at 12 months.⁶

Benefits of Breastfeeding

According to the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ), breastfeeding reduces children's risk for a variety of common childhood illnesses and less frequent but serious conditions, including sudden infant death syn-

drome, ear infections, upper and lower respiratory disease, asthma, childhood leukemia, childhood obesity and Type 2 diabetes.⁷ It also reduces maternal risk for breast and ovarian cancer. In addition to the health benefits, women have reported psychological benefits of breastfeeding—such as bonding more closely— as the most important factor in her decision to breastfeed.⁸

Based on this and other research, the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists and the American Academy of Pediatrics support exclusive breastfeeding for approximately six months, with continuation of breastfeeding, if possible, even longer.

By ensuring TRICARE covers breastfeeding supplies and education, this legislation would support women's efforts to successfully breastfeed, enabling women and their infants to benefit from the positive health outcomes related to breastfeeding.

1 Institute of Medicine, "Clinical Preventive Services for Women: Closing the Gaps," (2011), the National Academies Press.

2 <http://www.tricare.mil/mybenefit/home/overview/WhatIsTRICARE?>

3 Fiscal Year 2012 Report to Congress, Evaluation of the TRICARE Program: Access, Quality and Cost *available at* http://tricare.mil/tma/dhcape/program/downloads/TRICARE2013%2002_28_13%20v2.pdf

4 Department of Defense, Defense Health Agency "TRICARE® Covered Services" *available at* http://www.tricare.mil/~media/Files/TRICARE/Publications/FactSheets/Cvrd_Svcs_FS.pdf

5 Ibid.

6 Mao CY1, Narang S, Lopreiato J. Breastfeeding practices in military families: a 12-month prospective population-based study in the national capital region.

7 *TRICARE® Covered Services*, *op. cit.*

8 Bai YK, Middlestadt SE, Joanne Peng CY, Fly AD. Psychosocial factors underlying the mother's decision to continue exclusive breastfeeding for 6 months: an elicitation study. *J Hum Nutr Diet* 2009;22:134–140.