

Impact of digital technologies on breastfeeding

Authors:

Jane SCOTT¹ and Becky WHITE¹

¹ Curtin University, Perth, Western Australia

Digital technologies provide health professionals with an unprecedented opportunity to engage with breastfeeding women far beyond the local geographical reach of the professional. Widespread access to, and use of, handheld digital devices make mobile phones a feasible, affordable and acceptable medium for delivering breastfeeding support. The digital divide that exists between low and high income countries will determine the way in which mobile phones are used, but broadly speaking they can be used to support breastfeeding mothers through direct messaging, voice counselling and interactive media (smartphone apps and social media).

The ready availability of smartphone apps and mushrooming use of social media present both opportunities and risks for breastfeeding protection and support. For instance, while a large number of smartphone apps exist, relatively few are 'support' apps, with the majority developed to 'track' breastfeeding. These apps are designed to meet the apparent need of mothers to know exactly how much breastmilk their infant is receiving and potentially may undermine a woman's confidence in her breastmilk supply. Similarly, millennial mothers are quick and eager to share their opinions with other mothers via social media which can result in the widespread and rapid proliferation of breastfeeding misinformation.

Mobile phones are being increasingly used in mobile health (mHealth) interventions targeting pregnant women but to date relatively few mHealth interventions have explicitly targeted breastfeeding and/or been robustly evaluated. This presentation will provide a rationale and identify opportunities for using digital technologies to support and promote breastfeeding; compare and contrast how mobile phones are being used in mHealth breastfeeding interventions in low and high income countries and; describe the best-practice development, testing and preliminary process evaluation of Milk Man, a breastfeeding support app designed specifically for fathers.

Milk Man: a breastfeeding app for fathers

The Australian first, Milk Man smartphone app is designed specifically for new and expecting fathers. It aims to start them thinking and talking about breastfeeding and fatherhood, and to provide them with the information and skills needed to support their breastfeeding partner. The app provides a community space for men to talk to each other, delivers infant age-specific information and includes a comprehensive, searchable library of evidence-based information with links to relevant and credible external websites (e.g. Australian Breastfeeding Association). Information is delivered in a quirky, fun format designed to appeal to men. The app uses strategies to engage fathers, including gamification, social connectivity and bi-weekly push notifications, and has been developed and tested with members of the target group and experts in the field. This short presentation will describe the development and testing of Milk Man and demonstrate the engagement features of the app.