

Back to work

New mothers need to know how to successfully pump breast milk on the job

Have a plan.

It's something you'll hear OSF HealthCare Mission Partners (employees) Heather Ludwig and Stephanie Kitchens say over and over.

Ludwig, an international board certified lactation consultant, and Kitchens, a registered nurse, are helping new mothers navigate pumping breast milk at work as a federal law on pumping takes effect.

"If you feel like your employer is going to support you with pumping, you're going to be extremely loyal to that job," Ludwig says.

Laws protecting moms

In general, Illinois, Michigan and federal laws allow moms to pump at work and in a private space better than a bathroom stall until the child is 1 year old. But on April 28, 2023, the [Providing Urgent Maternal Protections for Nursing Mothers Act](#) (the PUMP Act for short) goes into effect. The law expands the number of mothers who are protected and strengthens a mother's ability to get relief in court if their employer is not following the law. It also says mothers can stay on the clock while pumping if they keep working, for example simply answering emails.

But moms still need to be their own best advocate, Ludwig says. It starts before you return to work. Three to four weeks prior, build up a supply of breast milk at home. Talk to your boss, coworkers and human resources representative about your needs. Be firm but fair in setting the expectations. Keep the conversation going during your months of pumping. Have allies like a lactation consultant in your corner.

"Think about where you're going to pump and what supplies you need to bring," Ludwig says. Make sure your pump fits you and is working. Ideally, your workplace will provide a space where you can leave the equipment and come and go to pump for a few minutes. That won't empty the tank, but it will "reset the clock" for a while before you feel the physical pressure of needing to pump again.

"Full and uncomfortable is one thing. But if you wait too long, you can end up with clogged ducts, [mastitis](#) and other nasty things," Ludwig says. "An emptied breast is a breast that's going to continue to make milk and a mom that's going to stay comfortable."

Kitchens' experience

Having a dedicated pumping space is crucial for professions like nursing, law enforcement or restaurant workers. For example, a waitress can't abandon her tables for a half hour and still expect a big tip.

Kitchens, too, couldn't afford to be away from her cardiac patients for a long time. Her first child came into the world in March 2020, and she returned to work that June – all during the height of the pandemic.

“I was a little unsure about how pumping would work,” she admits. “I was more into trying to please everybody and be the better nurse.”

Now with the task of producing milk for her second child, born in April 2022, Kitchens has been taking some of Ludwig’s advice to heart and having a smoother experience.

“I’m very open with my patients now,” Kitchens says with a smile. “I say ‘listen I’m a breastfeeding mother. I have to go relieve myself. When I’m done with that, I’ll come back and meet your needs.’ And they are totally fine with that.”

For other high stress jobs, options exist too. Police officers could be temporarily assigned to office work so they are not in a squad car all day. Truck drivers can hook up a hands-free pump before they turn on the engine and let the machine do its work underneath their clothes. Yes, hands-free pumping and driving is legal, Ludwig says.

Navigating the day

Ludwig says moms can expect to pump several times during a typical eight-to-10-hour shift. Staying on schedule and staying stress-free about it all is important.

“If you’re stressed out and your cortisol levels are high, it’s hard for your body to let your milk come out,” Ludwig says. “So having a good location is going to help mom feel supported. She can take care of business quicker so she can get back to work.”

Some mothers will bring their baby to work to feed at the breast. Having a good home support system is key for this option to work.

Milk can be stored in any cold, sanitary place, like the break room refrigerator.

“A lot of moms will just have a little lunch bag cooler with some freezer packs,” Ludwig says.

Bottom line advice

Kitchens agrees with Ludwig that mothers returning to work need to be their own best advocate. Stand up for yourself, even, Kitchens says. Make it clear that a pump break and a lunch break are separate, for example.

To view it another way: “Would an adult ask to use the bathroom or would they just go?” Kitchens says slyly.