

Communicating With Your Employer

Our research has shown that many employers and line managers may not have previously supported a breastfeeding mother returning to work and are often unaware of their responsibilities and obligations in this area. In many cases, they simply haven't encountered the situation before or considered what balancing breastfeeding and work actually involves. We also found that both managers and mothers can find it difficult to initiate these conversations, as the topic can feel awkward or unfamiliar. That's why it is essential to establish clear and supportive communication pathways, ones that open up space for open and practical discussions about returning to work and breastfeeding, and we have also created a guide for employers/line managers in Employer Guide 8. This can help ensure that mothers receive the support they need, and that managers feel better equipped to provide it.

Whether you are expecting a baby, currently on maternity leave, or returning to work as a new mother, this guide is here to help you confidently talk about your infant feeding plans and related needs whatever they may be. You don't need to have everything figured out, and it's okay if your plans change. Use this communication guide to start open and constructive conversations with your manager and get the support you need.

Before You Go on Maternity Leave

This is a good time to open up a gentle conversation about your thoughts or questions on infant feeding when you return to work. You don't need to have anything decided yet, and it is completely normal to still be unsure. But mentioning what you might be considering such as continuing breastfeeding or expressing milk can help make future planning easier and more supportive. You can also ask about what support is available at work, such as designated facilities, flexible breaks, or relevant policies. If there is a private space available for expressing or breastfeeding, you may want to see it in advance and understand how it works. It is also worth asking who else you can speak to who has gone through something similar if you would like more information or shared experiences later on.

If you are not sure how to begin, here is a sample email you could adapt and send to your line manager:

Subject: Planning ahead and infant feeding support

Hi John

As I prepare for my upcoming maternity leave, I just wanted to have a conversation about something I've been thinking about in terms of my return to work.

While I haven't made any firm plans yet, I may want to continue breastfeeding once I'm back, and I thought it might be helpful to find out a bit more about what support and facilities are available. Would it be possible to have a quick chat before I go.

And if there's someone else in HR or perhaps another parent in the organisation who's been through a similar experience, I'd really appreciate being connected with them as well just to hear how others have managed things.

Best regards,

Anna

And here are some other useful conversation starters you may like to use during the meeting

Helpful things you could say

"I'm still not sure about my feeding plans, but I may want to continue breastfeeding when I return. What kind of support is available?"

"Could I see the space where I'd be able to express milk?"

"Who would be the best person to talk to if I have questions later on?"

"Is there someone else here who's been through something similar that I could speak to?"

During Maternity Leave

This is a good time to update your manager and start more detailed planning. By now, your feeding patterns may be more established, and you might have a clearer idea of what you will need when you go back. If you have decided you want to continue breastfeeding or expressing milk after you return to work, let your manager know in writing (including by email) in advance of your return to work. As outlined in Mother Guide 4 your employer has a duty of care towards you and your child. To fulfil this responsibility, they are required to carry out a risk assessment and for that to happen, you will need to provide written notification that you are breastfeeding and intend to continue breastfeed upon return to work.

This might be a good opportunity to revisit the feeding space (if you have not seen it yet) and ask any new questions about privacy, cleanliness or storage. It is also helpful to start thinking about the kind of flexibility or breaks you may need, and to discuss whether any

adjustments to your hours, workload, or location could make the transition easier. Don't hesitate to ask how this might impact things like your pay or shift responsibilities.

Here is another sample email you could adapt and send to your line manager:

Subject: Planning ahead for my return

Hi John

I hope you are well. As I start thinking more about my return to work, I wanted to get in touch to begin planning ahead and help ensure the transition goes as smoothly as possible for both sides.

I've decided that I'd like to continue breastfeeding after I return, so I'm writing to provide formal notice of this. As I understand from our policies (and Information Guide X), this enables the organisation to fulfil its duty of care and carry out any necessary risk assessments.

It would be really helpful to have a conversation about the support available, particularly in relation to expressing milk at work, any flexibility around breaks or hours, and how the facilities work in practice.

Please let me know a time that would suit you for a short conversation.

I look forward to catching up soon.

Best regards,

Anna

Helpful things you could say

"I've decided I want to continue breastfeeding after I return, can we talk about what support is available?"

"Do you have any advice on how best to prepare for returning to work, especially now that I've made this decision?"

"Could I come in to see the space for expressing and ask a few questions about how it works?"

"Could we talk about flexibility around hours or breaks to help with expressing milk when I'm back?"

"How might this impact things like shift work, scheduling, or pay?"

When You Return to Work

Your first days back can feel like a big adjustment, especially if you are managing feeding or expressing alongside your return. Now is the time to put any plans into action and speak up about anything that is not working as expected.

If your original plans have changed or if something you agreed on is not working for you, it is absolutely okay to raise that with your line manager. You may want to reflect on what has been going smoothly and let them know, as positive feedback helps reinforce supportive practices. If you are facing any challenges, for example, the designated space for expressing is not meeting your needs, feeling rushed during breaks, or needing more time or privacy, it is helpful to be specific so your manager can help find practical solutions. You might also want to check what your options are if you need extra flexibility or adjusted hours, and how that might affect your responsibilities or pay. If you are feeling uncertain or overwhelmed, consider asking to speak with someone else at work who has had a similar experience.

Example Email: When things are mostly going well

Subject: Quick meeting request

Hi John,

I wanted to share a quick update now that I've been back at work for a few days. Overall, the return has gone more smoothly than I expected. Thank you again for your support so far.

However, there are a couple of things I've noticed that may need a bit of adjusting, particularly around how I manage expressing during the day. I would really appreciate a short conversation to talk through what is working well and what might need to be adapted, just to make sure things remain manageable.

Please let me know a good time for a quick meeting. I would also be happy to share any feedback that might help support other returning parents in future.

Thanks again, and I look forward to speaking soon.

Best
Anna

regards,

Example Email: When the return has been more challenging

Subject: Return arrangements

Hi John,

I wanted to share a quick update now that I've been back at work for a few days. It has been a bit more challenging than I anticipated, particularly around managing time and space for expressing during the day, so I would really appreciate the chance to talk through what is currently in place and whether there is any scope for adjustment.

Would you be available for a short meeting sometime soon? I would also be happy to share any feedback that might help inform support for other returning parents.

I appreciate your time and look forward to speaking soon.

Best
Anna

regards,

Helpful things you could say

"My situation has changed a bit since we last spoke. Can we talk about what adjustments might be possible now?"

"Thank you for the support—some parts of the return have been going really well. One thing I'd like to talk about is..."

"I've had a few issues with the space for expressing—could we find a solution?"

"I'm finding I need more flexibility than I thought—could we discuss the options and what that might mean?"

"I'm finding it a bit more challenging than I expected; the space designed for expressing is also being used for other purposes, which makes it feel less private. Can we look at other options?"

"I need to store expressed milk in the fridge, and for safety reasons, it needs to be kept consistently below 4°C. I've noticed the fridge is opened quite frequently, so I'm not sure the temperature is staying within the safe range. Would it be possible to place a thermometer inside to monitor it?"