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Objectives:

Exclusive breastfeeding to six months has many benefits for mothers and babies, including an early intervention which could reduce maternal postnatal weight retention and protect against childhood obesity. Overweight or obese women are less likely to initiate breastfeeding and more likely to cease earlier than normal weight women. Complex multifactorial barriers reflecting physical, physiological, psychological and social influences may make it difficult for overweight and obese women to breastfeed successfully. This study aims to explore healthcare professionals' perspectives and experiences of barriers to and facilitators of supporting overweight and obese women to breastfeed.

Design: A qualitative study.

Method:

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with ten midwives and six health visitors who volunteered to be interviewed from one NHS trust in London. Data were transcribed, coded and analysed using thematic analysis.

Results:

Varied perspectives were found regarding the relationships between maternal overweight/obesity and breastfeeding. Some acknowledged higher prevalence of pregnancy complexity among this group of women made it more difficult for women to breastfeed. There was recognition of cultural and organisational barriers that hindered breastfeeding support and conversely facilitators which could help. A lack of specific training for clinicians to support overweight and obese women to breastfeed was highlighted.

Conclusions:

Reducing obesity and promoting breastfeeding are public health priorities. Breastfeeding education and training for healthcare professionals need to include development of skills and competencies to prevent and overcome breastfeeding difficulties overweight and obese women might encounter, and tailoring of breastfeeding support for this group of women.