**Becoming an IBCLC**

## Choose Your Own Adventure

I’m excited that you’re interested in becoming an International Board Certified Lactation Consultant (IBCLC)! You probably have many questions about the path to becoming an IBCLC and where you should start. This guide is meant to help clarify how you get from where you are to where you want to be, but it is not meant to replace information from the International Board of Lactation Consultant Examiners (IBLCE).

## **Start Here**

Who’s who in lactation? There are numerous providers of lactation support services, all of whom are needed to promote, protect and support breastfeeding. Each of these supporters will have different levels of preparation, credentialing and expertise. In general, lactation support is classified in three (3) levels—peer support, lactation counselors or educators and lactation consultants. The IBCLC certification is an international credential that requires college courses, clinical experience and lactation-specific education, as well as an exam that assesses knowledge and skills. IBLCE is the independent accrediting body responsible for conferring the IBCLC credential, defining clinical competencies, writing and administering the exam, determining candidate eligibility, delineating scope of practice, overseeing compliance with the Code of Professional Conduct and presiding with an Ethics and Disciplinary Committee. Current information on the pathways to becoming an IBCLC can always be found at <https://ibclc-commission.org/> and this is always the first stop on your journey.

## **Where Are You Coming From?**

## **I’m currently a registered nurse, nutritionist, dietitian or other recognized health care professional working in a clinical or WIC setting serving lactating parents.**

If you are already in a clinical health care profession and working with new parents, then you have a straightforward path to achieving the IBCLC credential! You have already completed the required health sciences education. In the course of your work, you will complete the required 1,000 hours of lactation- specific clinical practice. Hospitals, birth centers, doctors’ offices and community clinics, including WIC, are considered supervised settings for clinical practice. See the IBLCE certification FAQs for information on tracking your time. Finally, you will need to complete 95 hours of lactation-specific education, including five hours of education focused on communication skills. The Missouri Breastfeeding Program offers several free trainings that can help you achieve these hours if you live or work in Missouri. You can also look for trainings that are recognized by the [Lactation Education Accreditation and Approval Review Committee](https://www.leaarc.org/) (LEEARC) which establishes standards for lactation education and peer reviews training programs. I recommend taking training over the course of several years, rather than all at once, so that you have time to learn and gain experience over time. It’s exciting to jump into a new field, but many professionals find that advanced training is more valuable once they have some clinical experience. Of course, if you’ve been working in your field for several years, then feel free to jump right in! You are the best judge of how quickly you integrate new experiences and new knowledge. Along the way, I recommend looking for self-study resources like Facebook groups for aspiring IBCLCs and this excellent [newsletter](https://thelactationcollege.substack.com/) from Dr. Barbara Philipp. It’s nice to have some study buddies as you get closer to sitting for the exam!

## **I’m currently a Breastfeeding Peer Counselor in WIC, a La Leche League leader or other peer lactation helper.**

The good news is that you are working or volunteering in a setting where you can easily complete the clinical hours you need before you sit for the exam. If you are pursuing pathway 1, you will need to verify that you are working in an appropriate supervised setting or recognized breastfeeding support counselor organization per IBLCE’s guidelines on the website. You will also need to complete 95 hours of lactation-specific education, including five hours of education focused on communication skills. The Missouri Breastfeeding Program offers several free trainings that can help you achieve these hours if you live or work in Missouri. You can also look for trainings that are recognized by the LEEARC which establishes standards for lactation education and peer reviews training programs. I recommend taking training over the course of several years, rather than all at once, so that you have time to learn and gain experience over time. Finally, you will need to assess the best way to complete the 14 subjects in the health sciences education guide required by IBLCE. Eight of these are required to be courses taught at an institution of higher learning. Before signing up for college courses, with the cost it entails, I recommend considering your future educational and career goals. Many places that employ IBCLCs prefer that the IBCLC also be a registered nurse (RN), registered dietitian (RD), other allied health professional or at least have a bachelor’s degree in one of those areas. There are also pathway 2 programs that provide a bachelor’s or master’s degree in lactation or maternal and child health, along with the supervised clinical hours and lactation-specific education needed to become an IBCLC. One of these [programs](https://myunion.edu/academics/bachelors/maternal-child-health/) even offers course credits for WIC breastfeeding peer counselors (BFPCs)! It is possible to take one college course to meet several requirements. Choose wisely. Remember, one class could fulfill more than one requirement. Online and international options can be more affordable. A few resources that are favorites for aspiring IBCLCs include: sophia.org, study.com and centerofexcellence.com. *These institutes have passed audits by IBLCE.*

Another option to consider is to continue working in a peer role or to become certified as a lactation counselor or educator. Families need all types of support when it comes to lactation. Just as there are many different levels of nurses who serve different patient needs, there are different levels of lactation supporters who serve different needs. This [document](https://uslca.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Whos-Who-August-2020.pdf) from the United States Lactation Consultant Association (USLCA) provides an overview of the different types of lactation support and credentials.

A special note for Missouri WIC BFPCs: Training for BFPCs beyond the training offered by the peer counseling program may be an allowable cost with WIC funding at the discretion of the local agency’s (LA’s) WIC coordinator or breastfeeding coordinator, with state agency (SA) approval. The cost of the IBLCE exam is sometimes allowable with WIC funding at the discretion of the LAs WIC coordinator or breastfeeding coordinator, with SA approval. However, the SA staff strongly encourages LA coordinators to consider if this is the best use of WIC funding since peer counselors cannot work as both BFPCs and IBCLCs in the WIC program. Most often, BFPCs who become IBCLCs leave WIC for other positions unless they also qualify as a CPA or nutritionist. For this reason, the request to spend WIC funding to pay for the BFPCs exam is frequently denied as we wish to be good stewards of taxpayer dollars.

## **I don’t currently work in lactation, but I really want to!**

It’s not uncommon for our own breastfeeding journeys to spark the desire to help other families find breastfeeding success. If you’re starting here, think about what your goals are and what you are able to do. If you want to help other moms, but only want to work a few hours a month or don’t need to be paid, consider a volunteer position as a La Leche League or Breastfeeding USA support group leader. Mom-to-mom support groups are an important and accessible resource for many mothers who are struggling with breastfeeding. These organizations provide all the training you need to get started with helping! If peer support appeals to you, but you want it to be your job, look around for WIC clinics near you to see if they are hiring breastfeeding peer counselors.

If you are currently a health care professional and want to transfer to lactation, think about the types of work you could do that would let you gain clinical hours working with breastfeeding families. Consider taking some of our [free breastfeeding trainings](https://health.mo.gov/living/families/wic/breastfeeding/trainings/) offered by the state agency to learn more about the profession. Also, take a look at the various types of credentials that could combine with your current profession. This [document](https://uslca.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Whos-Who-August-2020.pdf) from the USLCA provides an overview of the different types of lactation support and credentials. There are many different ways to work in lactation and one of these may suit you.

Finally, everyone can advocate for more rights for breastfeeding moms, more workplace support and better legislation to support families. These activities don’t require any credentials at all. You can become involved with a local breastfeeding coalition or the state agency coalition at [www.mobreastfeeding.org](http://www.mobreastfeeding.org) if advocacy work interests you.

## **Is it worth it?**

Before starting down the path to becoming an IBCLC, I do recommend that you do some research on the profession. Look on indeed.com and other job sites, both in your area and around the country, to see how many places are hiring IBCLCs, what other credentials they are looking for and what pay they are offering for the work. Think about how much it will cost you if you need to take college courses, pay for continuing education or pay for the exam. Will having the credentials add to your pay? Will it give you more opportunities in your current job? Will you be offered more interesting work? Will having this knowledge make you better at your job? Personally, I love being an IBCLC, love working with moms and babies and there is no question about this being the right path for me. I think that we can change lives by helping families succeed at breastfeeding and make our state a healthier place to live in. It takes passion and commitment to achieve this. Our goal at the SA is for all nutritionists and CPAs in WIC to be recognized as infant feeding experts and IBCLCs are the recognized expert in the biologically normal way to feed infants. Our goal in the Missouri Breastfeeding Program is that all hospitals and doctor’s offices will use best maternity care practices, including care provided by IBCLCs. We want every parent to be able to make informed feeding decisions and be supported in those decisions by credentialed professionals. To help you decide if it’s worth it, please take a few minutes to review these resources. These resources are not prepared by the state of Missouri and may not reflect the views of the state of Missouri.

[How to become an IBCLC](https://bfcaa.com/how-to-become-an-ibclc/)

[Free webinars on IBCLC topics](https://www.lactationtraining.com/shopping/online-shop/free-course)

[More tips on becoming an IBCLC](https://www.melaniemyersibclc.com/become-a-ibclc)

I wish you the best of luck, in whatever direction your adventure takes you.