

Researchers look for behavioral link between breastfeeding and lower risk of obesity

October 28 2008

Breastfeeding has a number of positive health benefits for baby: it can prevent ear infections and allergies, and lowers the risk of developing respiratory problems. It can also help prevent against obesity later in life, but the reason for this still isn't known.

In an effort to find this link, Katherine F. Isselmann, M.P.H., a doctoral candidate in Temple's department of public health, has been comparing the feeding habits of mothers who breastfed their babies and mothers who bottle fed their babies, and has also examined the eating habits of their pre-school aged children.

In preliminary research presented at this year's American Public Health Association annual meeting on Oct. 28, Isselmann and faculty members in the department of public health at the College of Health Professions surveyed more than 120 mothers on whether they had breastfed or bottle-fed their babies, using either pumped breast milk or formula.

They found breastfed children could more easily determine when they were full. Children who were bottle-fed with pumped breast milk were less likely to respond to the feeling of being full by the time they were preschool-aged. Also, children who had a lower response to fullness had a higher body mass index (BMI).

According to Isselmann, these results suggest a behavioral link between breastfeeding and obesity prevention, in that children who are breastfed grow to have more positive eating behaviors, which could help prevent

obesity later in life.

"Mothers who bottle feed often focus on a set amount of ounces per day or time schedule for feeding," said Isselmann. "This could lead mothers to rely more on the bottle for feedback than on the infant's cues of fullness and hunger."

She says with breast-feeding, the ability to measure in ounces how much a baby has eaten isn't there, so mothers can become more in tune with when their babies are done eating and babies are able to develop their own internal cues to signal when they feel full.

While some women may choose not to breastfeed, Isselmann says it's important to encourage mothers who bottle-feed to adopt more infant-focused feeding habits exhibited by mothers who breastfeed.

"The theory of 'x ounces per day' isn't set in stone for growing babies. Some days they may need more food, other days they may need less," said Isselmann.

Source: Temple University

Citation: Researchers look for behavioral link between breastfeeding and lower risk of obesity (2008, October 28) retrieved 11 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2008-10-behavioral-link-breastfeeding-obesity.html>

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