

# Breastfeeding could save the NHS millions, says new report

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Moderate increases in breastfeeding could save the NHS £40 million per year.

(Medical Xpress)—Low rates of breastfeeding in the UK are costing the NHS millions of pounds, reveals a report compiled by British academics, including researchers from Oxford University.

UNICEF UK, who commissioned the report, is calling for more support for mothers, given the numbers of women who start breastfeeding but stop before they might want to.

'Breastfeeding has many important short-term and long-term health benefits in children and in mothers,' said Maria Quigley of the National [Perinatal Epidemiology](#) Unit at the University of Oxford, who is one of the authors of the UNICEF UK report.

The researchers calculated how raising [breastfeeding rates](#) would save money through reducing illness. They produced [economic models](#) for five illnesses where the evidence is strongest: [breast cancer](#) in the mother and in the baby, gastroenteritis, respiratory infections, middle ear infections and necrotising enterocolitis – a serious condition.

They showed that increases in breastfeeding could see potential savings to the NHS of around £40 million per year.

That's the figure arrived at after calculating the reductions in hospitalisations, GP visits, and treatments for these conditions – if half the mothers who currently do not breastfeed were to do so for up to 18 months over their life, and if 45% of babies were exclusively breastfed for four months and 75% of babies in neonatal units were breastfed at discharge.

The cost savings are likely to be higher if the full range of conditions where breastfeeding can have a beneficial effect are taken into account.

The UNICEF report was carried out by a team including academics from Dundee University, Oxford University, the University of York, Brunel University, and St George's, University of London, as well as the National Childbirth Trust.

The findings suggest that investing in services to support women to breastfeed for longer would provide return on investment within a few years. Higher breastfeeding rates would yield greater savings.

Professor Mary Renfrew from Dundee University, who led the group, said: 'This research shines a spotlight on the profound protective effects which breastfeeding has on both mother and child.'

'It is clear that putting resources into supporting women to breastfeed successfully would be hugely cost effective to the NHS, as well as preventing the distress and pain felt by a mother who has a bad experience of breastfeeding.'

The UK has one of the lowest breastfeeding rates in the world, particularly in terms of duration of breastfeeding. While the number of mothers starting breastfeeding has risen over the past decade – it reached 81% across the UK in 2010 – rates of breastfeeding at 6–8 weeks remain low. 90% of mothers who stop breastfeeding say they stopped before they wanted to.

'All mothers should be able to make an informed decision about how they feed their baby, and they should be supported with whatever feeding method they choose, says Maria Quigley of Oxford University. 'Many women start breastfeeding their babies, but stop breastfeeding sooner than they wanted to. These women should be given support in breastfeeding.'

'We know that services for breastfeeding support in the UK are patchy. Our results should reassure policy makers, service planners and commissioners that supporting women to breastfeed is likely to be a good investment.'

UNICEF UK is calling for government and policy makers to recognise breastfeeding as a major public health issue and ensure access to consistently good support services to help mothers breastfeed for as long as they want to.

UNICEF UK deputy executive director Anita Tiessen said: 'As a society we are failing mothers and babies, and this new report shows that low breastfeeding rates in the UK are costing the NHS millions of pounds each year – as well as causing untold distress and suffering for families.

'We want to see breastfeeding recognised as a major public health issue from government level through to local children's centres, and appropriate investment and legislation put in place to give mothers a better experience of breastfeeding. The good news for commissioners is that our research shows that money invested to help women breastfeed for longer would provide a rapid financial return.'

Professor Mike Kelly, director of the Centre for Public Health Excellence at NICE (the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence), said: 'The authors present an argument which in a nutshell promises to make considerable savings for the health services, produce long run health benefits and is a mechanism for changing the differences in health outcomes across social groups. The idea is of course simplicity itself; improving the rates of the initiation and the continuation of [breastfeeding](#).'

**More information:** [www.unicef.org.uk/Latest/News/...-report-nhs-savings/](http://www.unicef.org.uk/Latest/News/...-report-nhs-savings/)

Provided by Oxford University

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