

Breastfeeding linked to lower risk of postnatal depression

August 20 2014



(Medical Xpress)—A new study of over 10,000 mothers has shown that women who breastfed their babies were at significantly lower risk of postnatal depression than those who did not.

The study, by researchers in the UK and Spain, and published today in the journal *Maternal and Child Health*, shows that [mothers](#) who planned to breastfeed and who actually went on to breastfeed were around 50% less likely to become depressed than mothers who had not planned to, and who did not, breastfeed. Mothers who planned to breastfeed, but who did not go on to breastfeed, were over twice as likely to become

depressed as mothers who had not planned to, and who did not, breastfeed.

The relationship between breastfeeding and [depression](#) was most pronounced when [babies](#) were 8 weeks old, but much smaller when babies were 8 months or older.

The research, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, used data drawn from the Avon Longitudinal Survey of Parents and Children (ALSPAC), a study of 13,998 births in the Bristol area in the early 1990s. Maternal depression was measured using the Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale when babies were 8 weeks, and 8, 21 and 33 months old. Depression was also assessed at two points during pregnancy, enabling the researchers to take into account mothers' pre-existing mental health conditions.

This is one of the largest studies of its kind; as well as being one of the few studies taking into account mothers' previous mental health, it also controls for socioeconomic factors such as income and relationship status, and for other potential confounders such as how babies were delivered, and whether they were premature.

"Breastfeeding has well-established benefits to babies, in terms of their physical health and cognitive development; our study shows that it also benefits the mental health of mothers," says Dr Maria Iacovou, from the University of Cambridge's Department of Sociology and a Bye Fellow at Fitzwilliam College.

"In fact, the effects on mothers' [mental health](#) that we report in this study are also likely to have an impact on babies, since [maternal depression](#) has previously been shown to have negative effects on many aspects of children's development."

Dr Iacovou believes that health authorities should not only be encouraging women to breastfeed, but should also provide a level of support that will help mothers who want to breastfeed succeed.

"Lots of mothers and babies take to breastfeeding pretty easily. But for many others, it doesn't come naturally at all; for these mothers, having someone with the training, the skills, and perhaps most importantly the time to help them get it right, can make all the difference," she adds.

"However good the level of support that's provided, there will be some mothers who wanted to breastfeed and who don't manage to. It's clear that these mothers need a great deal of understanding and support; there is currently hardly any skilled specialist help for these mothers, and this is something else that health providers should be thinking about."

Around one in 12 women in the sample experienced depressive symptoms during pregnancy, while one in eight experienced depression at one or more of the four measurement points after giving birth.

According to figures from the UK's Department of Health, almost three-quarters of mothers initiated breastfeeding in 2012/13; by the time of the 6-8 week check, only 47% of babies were being breastfed. This is one of the lowest rates of breastfeeding in Europe.

More information: "New Evidence on Breastfeeding and Postpartum Depression: The Importance of Understanding Women's Intentions." Cristina Borra, Maria Iacovou, Almudena Sevilla. *Maternal and Child Health Journal* [DOI: 10.1007/s10995-014-1591-z](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10995-014-1591-z). August 2014.

Provided by University of Cambridge

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