

Breastfeeding protects children from ear disease

June 23 2016, by Carys Garland, Sciencenetwork Wa



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Breastfeeding can have a positive effect on a child's hearing and language development, after being found to protect them from ear disease otitis media.

Researchers took data from the Raine study—involving more than 2000

WA children born in 1989.

The children were tested for otitis media [OM] at age three and six and categorised into whether they were or were not breastfed and if so, for how long.

There was a significant association between having been breastfed and not having OM at three years of age, but the protection given by breast [milk](#) had been lost by six years of age, Ear Science Institute senior research fellow and PMH senior paediatric audiologist Chris Brennan-Jones says.

"The level of risk we found is if kids weren't predominantly breastfed, they were about 33 per cent more likely to have otitis media than kids who were at three years of age."

Recurrent otitis media is not uncommon; affecting 26.8 per cent of three year olds, and 11.2 per cent of six year olds.

Sufferers of the disease experience painful ears, often disturbed sleep and sometimes increased temperature or fever,

If left untreated OM can result in serious complications such as mastoiditis and meningitis.

"They'd have intermittent hearing loss, which can vary from mild to a moderate level and affect their [language development](#) and behaviour," Mr Brennan-Jones says.

The study gave three possible explanations for why breast milk offers protection from OM including the antibodies associated with the milk, the position of the infant during breastfeeding, and the sucking action of taking milk from a breast rather than a bottle.

Otitis media more harmful for younger kids

Mr Brennan-Jones says having OM at a younger age is more detrimental to a child's hearing and language development.

"The critical period of language development is usually considered the period between zero to three years of age," he says.

For children six years and older, Mr Brennan-Jones says there aren't as many options to protect them from OM, but a consistent variable is day care attendance in early childhood.

"It's a consistent predictor and is associated with the high rates of OM that we observed," he says.

"But a child's attendance at day care is often unavoidable; it's something parents need to do to go to work and support themselves."

This article first appeared on [ScienceNetwork Western Australia](#) a science news website based at Scitech.

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