

# Adults who were breastfed as babies earn more and score higher in memory tests as adults

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

A research study from Queen's University Belfast, in collaboration with University College Dublin, University College London and Cass Business School, has found that babies who were breastfed went on to have a higher household income and scored higher on memory tests in

adulthood, in comparison to babies who were not.

The study examined whether there is an economic benefit associated with breastfeeding by tracking a nationally representative sample of babies born in England, Wales and Scotland in 1958. Around 9,000 participants were tracked from birth to adulthood.

The research team was led by Dr. Mark McGovern, Lecturer in Economics from Queen's Management School, in collaboration with colleagues Dr. Slawa Rokicki from University College Dublin; Dr. Giampiero Marra from University College London; and Dr. Rosalba Radice from Cass Business School.

Dr. McGovern said:

"Promotional campaigns have highlighted the [health](#) benefits of breastfeeding in recent years; however, our research shows that in addition to those benefits, breastfeeding may also have a significant economic impact throughout the life course."

The research team found that the adults who were breastfed had a 10 per cent higher household income and scored higher on memory tests at age 50, in comparison to those who were not breastfed.

Breastfeeding rates in the UK, especially in Northern Ireland, remain low by international standards. The impact of the results from this study suggest that [public health campaigns](#) targeted at increasing rates of breastfeeding are likely to have a substantial economic return and raise human capital and productivity across the life course, as well as providing health benefits for women and children.

"Our initial results from the study suggest that a 10 percentage point increase in the number of breastfed babies in Northern Ireland each year

could generate around £100 million in additional lifetime earnings, of which around £20 million could be expected to be collected in the form of tax revenue, which could be partly used for public health campaigns," Dr. McGovern explained.

A recent report from UNICEF UK examined the potential for implementing a large-scale programme aimed at increasing breastfeeding rates. The cost of running an intervention similar to that UNICEF considered is likely to be around £200 per additional breastfed child.

Dr. McGovern explains:

"Using this type of programme, and aiming for an additional 2,400 breastfed children in Northern Ireland (10 per cent of the approximately 24,000 babies born here every year), the cost would be around £500,000 per year. Comparing costs and benefits suggests that such a programme would be highly cost-beneficial over the long run."

Dr. Rokicki, from University College Dublin commented:

"Having evidence on the economic benefits of breastfeeding supports the argument for greater resources being invested in public health campaigns and breastfeeding support services. Breastfeeding may not be not right for everyone, but for those women who do want to breastfeed, increased support and information provided by these campaigns could help more women in doing so."

The same research study also found that those who were breastfed had better memory scores at age 50 (by 0.15 standard deviations), showing a potential link between breastfeeding and cognitive ability.

Dr. McGovern added:

"Our concluding results so far in the study show that if more babies are [breastfed](#) there are likely to be substantial economic returns to the resources invested in these public health campaigns, and women and children could also benefit through improvements in health, cognitive ability, and greater earnings potential."

Dr. Rosalba Radice, Cass Business School said:

"This is an example where advances in statistical methodologies and their implementation into the R package GJRM (Marra and Radice, 2017) have allowed to model and quantify the long run beneficial effects of [breastfeeding](#)."

**More information:** Mark McGovern et al. Breastfeeding Promotion as an Economic Investment. [pure.qub.ac.uk/portal/files/15 ... 7/mcgovern210318.pdf](http://pure.qub.ac.uk/portal/files/15...7/mcgovern210318.pdf)

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