

The Long-Term Public Health Benefits of Breastfeeding

Asia-Pacific Journal of Public Health

2016, Vol. 28(1) 7–14

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DOI: 10.1177/1010539515624964

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Abstract

Breastfeeding has many health benefits, both in the short term and the longer term, to infants and their mothers. There is an increasing number of studies that report on associations between breastfeeding and long-term protection against chronic disease. Recent research evidence is reviewed in this study, building on previous authoritative reviews. The recent World Health Organization reviews of the short- and long-term benefits of breastfeeding concluded that there was strong evidence for many public health benefits of breastfeeding. Cognitive development is improved by breastfeeding, and infants who are breastfed and mothers who breastfeed have lower rates of obesity. Other chronic diseases that are reduced by breastfeeding include diabetes (both type 1 and type 2), obesity, hypertension, cardiovascular disease, hyperlipidemia, and some types of cancer.

Keywords

breastfeeding, benefits, chronic disease, review

Introduction

There is increasing evidence that early development has a long-term impact on health outcomes. The first 1000 days following conception is the most important time in programming health for adult life.^{1,2} Recent research has highlighted the public health importance of promoting breastfeeding as one of the more important components of life programming. The World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) have promoted breastfeeding as a key strategy in improving short-term health, as promoted in the Millennium Development Goals.^{3,4} More recently, the public health significance of infant feeding and chronic disease has been recognized in several major international reports.^{5,6} These have been prepared despite the difficulty of reviewing the literature relating to breastfeeding and infant feeding, as the evidence almost always comes from observational studies. There are ethical issues that usually prevent the use of randomized controlled trials on research using

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breastfeeding. Generally, evidence for breastfeeding must rely on the summation of observational studies.

The evidence for short-term outcomes, such as reduced rates of infection, can be classified as strong, but the longer term effects must always be less certain due to our inability to completely account for confounding factors. Often breastfeeding does not reach the highest levels of research quality expected for the development of pharmaceutical interventions or public health strategies, and the longer term benefits of breastfeeding are generally regarded as of moderate strength only. However, despite these limitations the conclusion of the major reports are all similar in recommending exclusive breastfeeding for 6 months followed by continuing breastfeeding as complementary foods are introduced for as long as the mother wishes.³ The sheer volume of supportive evidence supports the position of the UNICEF and the WHO, a position that is endorsed by most national ministries of health and professional organizations.

The objective of this article is to update the major reviews of the long-term beneficial effects of breastfeeding, that is, beyond the first 2 years of life, with a particular emphasis on the impact of chronic disease in adult. This article will provide an overview of recent major reviews together with major additional studies.

Methodology

A review of recent major systematic reviews of breastfeeding and early development and long-term health was undertaken. The reports reviewed included the WHO reports on the short- and long-term benefits, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the USA Technology Assessment Report, the Surgeon Generals Call to Action, and the National Health and Medical Research Council (Australia) reports.⁵⁻¹³ A search of the English language literature was then undertaken to update the findings of the major reports. Additional searches were undertaken for areas where the evidence was less definitive or emerging, including the areas of intellectual development, obesity, and resistance to *Helicobacter pylori* infection.

There are a number of specific issues that need to be considered when reviewing the breastfeeding literature:

1. Randomized controls are unethical for infants in involving breastfeeding, as the overwhelming evidence is that breastfeeding is the best method of feeding babies.
2. Breastfeeding reviews predominantly rely on observational studies, and despite high standards of research, residual confounding may be a problem.
3. Infant feeding is a dynamic process, always changing. The issue of reverse causation must always be considered. For example, health practitioners have encouraged infants from families prone to allergies to continue to breastfeed for longer. In recent years, when cross-sectional studies are undertaken there is a false association between breastfeeding and allergies.¹⁴
4. Measurement of breastfeeding is always difficult due to the use of different periods of recall and different definitions.^{15,16} Many potentially useful studies of breastfeeding use definitions, such as only recording feeding method in the past 24 hours, that do not allow the gathering of accurate data. Many studies used methods such as case reports, cross-sectional studies, or long-term recall that do not permit their inclusion in systematic reviews.

The definitions that will be used in this article are based on the following WHO definitions^{17,18}:

Exclusive breastfeeding: The infant has received only breastmilk from his or her mother or wet-nurse or expressed breast milk and no other liquids or solids, with the exception of drops or syrups consisting of vitamins, mineral supplements, or medicines.

Predominant (full) breastfeeding: Infants who are receiving almost all of the nutrients from breastmilk but take some other liquids such as fluid, water-based drinks, oral rehydration solutions, ritual fluids, and drops or syrups.

Any breastfeeding: The infant is receiving some breastmilk during a 24-period.

Results

In its landmark study of mortality due to “not breastfeeding,” the WHO Collaborative Group found a substantial increase in infant mortality in the first few years of life in infants who were not breastfed.¹⁹ Breastfeeding promotion became one of the major strategies used to reduce the burden of infant mortality and remains most important in the control of infection, even in modern health care settings. A recent study of 845 infants in Chengdu, People’s Republic of China, showed a substantial reduction in the prevalence of lower respiratory tract infections in infants less than 6 months of age where they had been breastfed for at least 3 months (odds ratio [OR] = 0.329; 95% confidence interval [CI] = 0.145-0.792).²⁰ Studies have also shown the benefit of the use of breastmilk in reducing the incidence and mortality of necrotizing enterocolitis in low birthweight infants treated in neonatal intensive care units. There is a high level of consensus about the short-term benefits of breastfeeding on reducing morbidity, of which the WHO and the Surgeon General’s reports are good examples.^{11,13}

More recently, the issue of *Helicobacter pylori* infection prevention by breastfeeding has been studied because of its role in gastritis, gastric carcinoma, dental caries, and as a source of chronic inflammation. Infection is frequently acquired in early childhood.²¹ The results of a meta-analysis confirm earlier reviews and suggest a protective effect of breastfeeding in economically less developed settings.²² Out of the 38 studies included in the meta-analysis, only 2 studies were from Asia.²³

The major long-term benefits of breastfeeding listed in the WHO report include the following²:

- Breastfeeding was associated with higher performance on intelligence tests and cognitive development
- Breastfeeding significantly reduces the risk of obesity in childhood and later in adults next
- A reduction in the risk of type 2 diabetes
- A small protective effect was found against elevated systolic blood pressure

Cognitive Development

The general consensus of many reports is that IQ is increased in infants who are breastfed for longer than 6 months by 3 to 5 points.^{9,24} The relationship appears to be dose-dependent. However, it also needs to be acknowledged that there are many confounding social factors in the determination of cognitive development.

A prospective birth cohort study with a 3-decade follow-up from Brazil (n = 5914 neonates with 3493 followed up) found an important relationship between breastfeeding for 12 months or more and cognitive development²⁵:

- Higher IQ scores, a difference of 3.76 points (95% CI = 2.2-5.33)
- Four more years of education, 0.91 years (95% CI = 0.42-1.40)
- Higher monthly income of 341 Brazilian reals (95% CI = 93.8-588.3)

A cohort study from Singapore confirms the benefits of breastfeeding on improved cognitive development in Asian infants.²⁶ Breastfeeding has not been shown to be associated with the prevention of autism.²⁷

Obesity

Most reviews of breastfeeding suggest a protective effect during childhood that persists through to adult life.²⁸ In light of the current epidemic of obesity and chronic disease throughout the Asia-Pacific region, breastfeeding has the potential to be an important prevention strategy. In China, for example, obesity levels in children in the 1980s were 1% to 2%, but 3 decades later this has increased to 20% or more in large cities.²⁹ Because of the use of different criteria for classification of obesity and the lack of age-adjusted data, it is difficult to quantify the numbers and trends in child obesity for the region, but there is no doubt that obesity in children and adults is on the increase throughout the Asia-Pacific region.

A further difficulty arises in the use of self-reported data. It is widely accepted that weight is commonly underreported and often height is exaggerated. In a study of Chinese mothers living in Australia and a comparative group living in China, it was found that only 10% of children who were actually overweight or obese were correctly identified as being in these categories.²⁰ Indeed, 70% of the overweight or obese children were thought by their mothers to be normal and 18% were considered to be underweight and requiring additional food. The Surgeon General's report considered that exclusive breastfeeding for 6 months could reduce obesity risk by 30%.¹¹ In a widely reported meta-analysis, Harder et al reported a 4% decrease in obesity levels up to 9 months, and recent report by Woo and Martin suggest that the range of benefit is 10% to 20%.^{30,31} In the most recent (2015) meta-analysis of breastfeeding and the prevention of obesity, Horta and colleagues updated the previous 2 WHO reports and included 133 effect estimates.²⁸ Breastfed subjects were less likely to be classified as obese/overweight, OR = 0.74 (95% CI = 0.70-0.78). One possible mechanism is the favorable effect of breastfeeding on the establishment of the human microbiome, which has been linked to obesity.³² The microbiome may also be altered by the use of antibiotics in infancy and this may be explained by action on the microbiome.³³⁻³⁵

The debate on the relationship between breastfeeding and lower rates of obesity continues because of the reliance on observational data. The editor of *JAMA Pediatrics* summarizes the debate and concludes that we should just promote breastfeeding, "Should we continue to spend research dollars on the breastfeeding/obesity question? Causality will never be proven, because it is unethical to randomize women to a formula-feeding arm. Regardless, breastfeeding should be promoted."³⁶ This is a position with which the US Surgeon General agrees,

The first step in an obesity prevention program is to ensure that all mothers have the opportunity to breastfeed their infants, exclusively for six months and then continuing complimentary feeds are introduced. Infants who are not breastfed are 33% more likely become obese children.¹¹

Diabetes

Breastfeeding protects against the development of type 1 diabetes in adolescents and young adults and type 2 diabetes in adults. In a cohort study of infants in Australia, at the age of 21 years the odds ratio of developing type 1 diabetes was 0.45 (95% CI = 0.23-0.87; n = 3959).³⁷ Horta et al developed a new meta-analysis of breastfeeding and diabetes type 2, which included 11 studies.²⁸ Breastfeeding was associated with a lower odds of type 2 diabetes, OR = 0.65 (95% CI = 0.49-0.86), using a random-effect model. The most recent systematic review found that breastfeeding reduced the rate of type 2 diabetes with a pooled OR of 0.65 (95% CI = 0.49-0.86).²⁸

Breastfeeding Also Has Long-Term Benefits for Mothers

The long-term benefits to mothers include reduced rates of ovarian cancer, reduced premenopausal breast cancer, and reduced obesity, type 2 diabetes, and heart disease. Mothers who breastfed their infants were on average 8 kg lighter 6 years later compared to mothers who had not

breastfed their infants.³⁸ A recent study in the Asia Pacific region also showed a reduction in postnatal depression in mothers who continue to breastfeed.³⁹

Breastfeeding also reduces the risk of type 2 diabetes in mothers. A review by Aune et al of 6 cohort studies with 273 961 mothers found that 10 842 developed diabetes and were included in the meta-analysis. The summary relative risk for the highest duration of breastfeeding versus the lowest was 0.68 (95% CI = 0.57-0.82), showing a strong association between breastfeeding and lower rates of diabetes.⁴⁰ Jager et al undertook a meta-analysis of women with gestational diabetes mellitus who breastfed for longer than 6 months and found that they had the lowest risk of continuing with postpartum diabetes.⁴¹ In this meta-analysis the pooled hazard ratio of diabetes and lifetime breastfeeding duration of 6 to 11 months compared with no breastfeeding was 0.89 (95% CI = 0.82-0.97).⁴¹ This meta-analysis included a nested case-control study within the Potsdam EPIC cohort. A recent cohort from the Kaiser Permanente group has confirmed that mothers with gestational diabetes who are breastfeeding are less likely to have diabetes 2 years postpartum.⁴²

For other chronic conditions and protective associations with breastfeeding the Women's Health Initiative Study (n = 139 681) found that a lifetime history of more than 12 months lactation resulted in the following:

- Hypertension reduction (OR = 0.88)
- Diabetes reduced (OR = 0.80)
- Hyperlipidemia reduced (OR = 0.81)
- Cardiovascular disease reduced (OR = 0.91)

In this study, the results were compared to women who never breastfed and dose-response relationships were observed in the fully adjusted models.^{43,44}

A follow-up of the European Investigation into Cancer and Nutrition prospective cohort (n = 322 972) found that mothers who had breastfed an infant had a reduced risk of dying over the following decade (OR = 0.80; 95% CI = 0.76-0.84).⁴⁵

Discussion

The mechanism of action of many of the long-term effects may be similar for several conditions. For example, breastfeeding modifies the development and maintenance of the human microbiome.⁴⁶ It is now thought that the composition of the microbiome is important in the development of a number of chronic diseases, including diabetes and obesity.⁴⁷ Obesity in infants may be related to the lower protein levels found in breastmilk compared to infant formula.⁴⁸ Obesity is also a risk factor for many chronic diseases, including diabetes, heart disease, and cancer. The World Cancer Research Foundation report recommends that all infants be breastfed and suggests that at least part of protective effects of breastfeeding against cancers may be due to the lower rates of obesity.⁴⁹ Breastfeeding may have a beneficial effect on maternal cancers because of the suppression of ovulation.⁵⁰

Both the WHO and UNICEF recommend that to optimize benefits to both mothers and infants, breastfeeding is initiated within 1 hour of birth; that infants be breastfed exclusively for the first 6 months of life; and breastfeeding should be continued (for 2 years or more) while complementary foods are introduced.⁵¹

There are a number of limitations that need to be considered when interpreting the results of this and other reviews of the relationships between breastfeeding and long-term morbidity. They are related to the lack of interventional studies for ethical reasons. Instead, we rely on the accumulation of evidence from observational studies. However, since breastfeeding has very few contraindications it can be safely promoted for almost all infants.⁵²

Fifty years ago the US Surgeon General released his first report on Smoking and Health, which changed the direction of public health. It was the first report to use a major meta-analysis of a public health issue and to adopt Koch's postulates to chronic disease etiology. Since the release of the report, the level of smoking in adults in Western countries has declined dramatically resulting in considerable public health benefits. More recently, the Surgeon General has released a report on breastfeeding, and it is hoped that it will have the same level of impact on infant feeding and resultant public health benefits as the original report on smoking.¹¹

Conclusion

The current evidence suggests many beneficial effects for mothers who breastfeed and infants who are breastfed. These benefits will make a substantial contribution to the control of chronic disease in our region. The management of chronic disease should start with an emphasis on breastfeeding, particularly an extended duration of breastfeeding following exclusive breastfeeding for the first 6 months of life.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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