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Breast is best

Bottle-fed babies risk infection, study says

LONDON (Reuter) – Babies breastfed for the first 13 weeks of their lives are three times less likely to develop gastrointestinal infections than bottle-fed infants or those breastfed for a shorter period, said a study released today.

The researchers said they found a similar but smaller protective effect against respiratory illness.

The study, conducted at Ninewells Hospital and Medical School in Dundee, Scotland, suggested that the benefits of breastfeeding last for up to one year, even if the mother ends the practice at 13 weeks.

Doctors said the study was the most detailed examination of the benefits of breastfeeding in the industrialized world, although the advantages of breastfeeding in developing

countries have been known for some years.

The researchers, led by Dr. Peter Howie, said the study had important implications for infant feeding policies. Currently, doctors generally recommend that babies be breastfed for four to six months.

Howie and his colleagues said their study did not undermine this view, but it could make the decision to breastfeed or use powdered milk easier for working mothers because it showed that advantages could be gained from only three months of breastfeeding.

The researchers noted that some working women choose to bottlefeed their babies on powdered milk from birth because they believe a short period of breastfeeding will not be worthwhile.

"Our findings suggest that mothers should be encouraged to breastfeed for at least three months, and maternity leave allowances should reflect this," they said in the study published in the *British Medical Journal*.

"In addition, there is also a strong case for the provision of creche (nursery) facilities at work to allow nursing mothers to continue breastfeeding."

The survey followed 674 mothers and their babies for two years after birth. About one-third chose to breastfeed for 13 weeks or more, 267 used a bottle from birth and 180 breastfed for less than 13 weeks.

They found that about 16 per cent of both bottlefed and early-weaned babies developed gastrointestinal illnesses, while the rate for breastfed babies was close to five per cent.

REFERENCE: Howie, P.W., Forsyth, J.S., Ogston, S.A., Clark, A. and C. du V. Florey: Protective effect of breast feeding against infection. *British Med. J.* **300**(#6716): 11-16 (1990). [DC Library call number: PER R31.B93]