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# Breastfeeding, cancer link not found in study

But there is one exception, researchers say

Reuters News Agency

LONDON – Breastfeeding has little effect on breast cancer, U.S. researchers suggest today after a large study intended to settle a long-lasting debate.

Data on nearly 90,000 middle-aged women showed that those who had never breastfed were neither more nor less likely to develop breast cancer than women who had.

Dr. Karin Michels and colleagues at the Harvard School of Public Health dipped into an existing study of 120,000 U.S. nurses, who regularly fill out questionnaires on all aspects of their health.

They picked out nearly 90,000 middle-aged nurses who did not have cancer and who had at least one child. They were followed for six years, during which just under 1,500 cases of invasive breast cancer were

diagnosed.

Researchers took into account various factors, such as whether a women had used contraceptives, what kind, the age when she had her first child, and whether and for how long she breastfed her children.

They found no link between breastfeeding and cancer rates.

"These data suggest that there is no important overall association between breastfeeding and the occurrence of breast cancer," they wrote in the medical journal *Lancet*.

Breastfeeding is known to protect babies from a range of diseases, and reports indicate that breastfed babies may have better brain functions. The effects last all their lives.

But reports going back 70 years made some doctors think breastfeeding increased the risk of breast cancer, especially among

women who had some trouble such as an inability to produce milk in one or both breasts. Later studies, on the other hand, had indicated a lower cancer risk among women who breastfed.

There was one exception in the Harvard results – women who had just one child and breastfed had a lower risk of cancer than women who had one child and did not breastfeed.

And the researchers warned that most of the women in the study had gone through the menopause – they were aged between 40 and 65 at the beginning of the study.

Breastfeeding could possibly protect premenopausal women, they said, and urged further study.

**REFERENCE:** Michels, K.B., Willett, W.C., Rosner, B.A., Manson, J.E., Hunter, D.J., Colditz, G.A., Hankinson, S.E. and Speizer, F.E.: Prospective assessment of breastfeeding and breast cancer incidence among 89 887 women. *The Lancet* **347**(#8999): 431-436 (1996). [DC Library call number: PER R31.L3]