

# Breastfeeding reduces mothers' risk of heart disease and stroke

The health benefits of breastfeeding for babies are well known. In fact, breastfeeding also has been linked to maternal health benefits, including lower risk for Type 2 diabetes, ovarian cancer and breast cancer.

Now, a meta-analysis published in *Journal of the American Heart Association (JAHA)*, an open access, peer-reviewed journal of the American Heart Association study has said that women who breastfed were less likely to develop heart disease or a stroke, or die from cardiovascular disease than women who did not breastfeed.

The review included health records for nearly 1.2 million women (average age 25 at first birth) and analyzed the relationship between breastfeeding and the mother's individual cardiovascular risk.

The special issue, *JAHA Spotlight on Pregnancy and Its Impact on Maternal and Offspring Cardiovascular Health*, includes about a dozen research articles exploring various cardiovascular considerations during pregnancy for mother and child.

"Previous studies have investigated the association between breastfeeding and the risk of cardiovascular disease in the mother; however, the findings were inconsistent on the strength of the association and, specifically, the relationship between different durations of breastfeeding and cardiovascular disease risk.

"Therefore, it was important to systematically review the available literature and mathematically combine all of the evidence on this topic," said senior author Peter Willeit, professor of clinical epidemiology at the Medical University of Innsbruck in Innsbruck, Austria.

Researchers reviewed health information from eight studies conducted between 1986 and 2009 in Australia, China, Norway, Japan and the US and one multinational study.

"We collected information, for instance, on how long women had breastfed during their lifetime, the number of births, age at first birth and whether women had a heart attack or a stroke later in life or not," said first author Lena Tschiderer, a postdoctoral researcher at the Medical University of Innsbruck.

The review found that compared to women who never breastfed, women who reported breastfeeding during their lifetime had a 11% decreased risk of developing cardiovascular disease. Also, over an average follow-up period of 10 years, women who breastfed at some time in their life were 14% less likely to develop coronary heart disease; 12% less likely to suffer strokes; and 17% less likely to die from cardiovascular disease.

Despite recommendations to breastfeed by organizations including the WHO and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), both of which recommend babies are breastfed exclusively through at least six months of age, only 1 in 4 infants receives only breastmilk for the first six months of life.

Commenting on the study outcome, Dr Arun Gupta, a pediatrician working to improve breastfeeding in India said that benefits of breastfeeding for infants and mothers are already well known. "Mothers should be made aware about these benefits so that they know it is beneficial to both of them."

He said that to encourage breastfeeding, his organization Breastfeeding Promotion Network of India (BPNi) recently joined hands with Association of Healthcare Providers of India (AHPI) to launch 'National Accreditation Center for Breastfeeding Friendly Hospitals'.

The tag will be given to only those maternity hospitals which are found to provide the best environment to mothers and newborn babies, said Dr Gupta.