Does Breastfeeding Duration Affect Childhood Obesity?

Volume 23, Number 4, May 2013

“No,” say Miao Jiang and Lister Hill scholar Michael Foster. “The relationship between breastfeeding duration and body mass index (BMI) is very small among the children in this study. Any recommendation that promotes breastfeeding to reduce childhood obesity is premature and should be reconsidered.”

In recent decades, childhood obesity has increased rapidly and may jeopardize later health, imposing high costs of illness on society. In 2010, the White House Task Force on Childhood Obesity gave 70 recommendations for reducing childhood obesity including breastfeeding. The breastfeeding recommendation was based on three systematic reviews that included 54 studies published from 1966 to 2003. However, because breastfeeding reflects a wide range of child and family characteristics that also influence child outcomes, it is difficult to establish causality between breastfeeding and childhood obesity.

The analyses conducted for this study rely on a nationally representative sample from the Child Development Supplement (CDS) of the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID). The sample provides maternal, family, and child characteristics for over 3,000 children from surveys conducted in 1997 and 2002. Forty-six percent of the mothers reported having ever breastfed their babies in this sample and the average length of breastfeeding was about eight months. Using generalized propensity score and generalized additive model analysis, the researchers found no evidence of any effect of breastfeeding on childhood obesity.

“Breastfeeding may indeed have many health benefits for infants and mothers, but it is not a magic cure for childhood obesity,” say the researchers. “We should invest more efforts on addressing the direct causes of childhood obesity, such as increasing physical activity and improving the child’s dietary intake.”

*Health Services Research, Vol. 48, No. 2, April 2013, pp. 628–651*