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Study links breastfeeding with lower risk of heart disease in Australian mums

Mothers who breastfed are 34 percent less likely to die of heart disease



Mothers who breastfed their babies have a lower risk of developing or dying from heart disease than those who don't breastfeed, finds new research from the University of Sydney.

Published in [Journal of American Heart Association](#), the study of over 100,000 mothers from New South Wales participating in the Sax Institute's [45 and Up Study](#) found women who breastfed had a 14 percent lower risk of developing, and 34 percent lower risk of dying from, cardiovascular disease.

This is the first Australian study to explore the relationship between breastfeeding and heart disease, important given heart disease is the leading cause of death for women worldwide says lead author Dr Binh Nguyen.

"Our study suggests that among childbearing women, breastfeeding may offer long-term heart health benefits in addition to its known benefits for infants and mothers," said Dr Nguyen from the University of Sydney's School of Public Health and Charles Perkins Centre.

"We know that changing lifestyle factors such as weight and diet can significantly reduce risks of heart disease and we have taken this a step further by looking at lifestyle behaviours that are specific to women."

Senior author Associate Professor Melody Ding said further research was needed to explore why breastfeeding appears to show protective benefits for heart health.

“At this stage we can’t pinpoint why but one of the likely theories is that the calories women expend breastfeeding, nearly 500 each day, are associated with positive changes in metabolism which help women that breastfeed to lower their risk of heart disease,” said [Associate Professor Ding](#) from the School of Public Health and Charles Perkins Centre.

About the study

University of Sydney researchers linked retrospective survey data on breastfeeding from 2006 to 2009 from the Sax Institute’s [45 and Up Study](#) – the largest ongoing study of healthy ageing in the Southern Hemisphere – with hospital admission and death data.

Women who had existing heart health issues were excluded from the study and substantial adjustments were made to take into account socio-economic influences and concurrent lifestyle risk factors.

Key findings:

- In women who have had children, breastfeeding compared to never breastfeeding was associated with a 14 percent lower risk of developing and a 34 percent lower risk of dying from cardiovascular disease.
- In women who breastfed on average up to 12 months per child, a 15 percent lower risk of developing and a 30-40 percent lower risk of dying from cardiovascular disease were found compared to women who never breastfed.
- Findings were independent of socioeconomic status, and overall health-related lifestyle.

While breastfeeding and cardiovascular health is a growing area of interest there is still limited research in this area.

The new longitudinal study builds on a systematic review by the team published in [PLOS ONE](#) in 2017 which found some evidence of the protective role of breastfeeding for cardiovascular risk factors such as hypertension. However, the few studies on cardiovascular disease incidence and mortality showed mixed results, which motivated the researchers to conduct the current study.

Sax Institute Deputy CEO Dr Martin McNamara said the 45 and Up Study continues to reveal new insights about the health of Australians.

“Our ability to follow people for such a long time is driving important new findings – in this case the link between breastfeeding and cardiovascular outcomes,” he said.

Media enquiries:

University of Sydney: Michelle Blowes, michelle.blowes@sydney.edu.au, 0478 303 173
Sax Institute: Hugo Wilcken, hugo.wilcken@saxinstitute.org.au, 0451 122 146