New study tries to link breastfeeding with higher IQ and income

By ACSH Staff — March 19, 2015

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends mothers breastfeed their babies exclusively for up to six months and then a combination of solid foods and breastfeeding from six months to one year (their official policy makes no mention of formula, although they do allow complementary foods). The Academy says that breastfeeding reduces the risk of serious colds, respiratory tract infections (including pneumonia), ear infections, sudden infant death syndrome, type 1 diabetes, obesity, gastrointestinal tract infections and many other health problems. A new study tries [1] to link breastfeeding to higher IQ and income, but we say not so fast.

Researchers from the Federal University of Pelotas in Brazil led by Dr. Bernardo Lessa Horta, interviewed almost 6,000 mothers initially about their plans for breastfeeding and then conducted follow up close to the time of weaning. They then followed almost 70 percent of those babies until the age of 30 (yes, for thirty years!) and found a positive association between breastfeeding and performance, intelligence, education, school achievement and income. Breastfeeding for at least 12 months was associated with an IQ almost four points higher and monthly incomes almost 20 percent higher compared to those who were breastfed for less than one month.

Dr. Lessa Horta explains these findings saying that breast milk is rich in long-chain polyunsaturated fatty acids which are important to brain growth and development. But Texas A&M Dr. Professor Joan Wolf points out this serious problem with their analysis: This study does not address the very real possibility that mothers who choose to breastfeed, regardless of income or education, distinguish themselves from those who bottle-feed in all kinds of ways that are likely to promote intelligence.

And as ACSH s Dr. Ruth Kava has said in the past [2], While breastfeeding has definite benefits for both mother and baby, let s not forget that feeding with appropriate formulas is a viable and healthful option. Not all new mothers want or are able to breastfeed, and they should not be made
to feel inadequate or that they are not taking good care of their infants.

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