

## MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS

### Breastfeeding could reduce MS relapse

Exclusive breastfeeding for at least 2 months in women with multiple sclerosis (MS) significantly reduces the risk of postpartum MS relapse, according to a study published in *Archives of Neurology*. “We were surprised by how protective exclusive breastfeeding seems to be; we are currently planning a confirmatory study at multiple centers in the US and Canada,” reports lead author Annette Langer-Gould.

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Women with MS are known to experience reduced numbers of relapses during pregnancy, but have a high risk of relapse shortly after delivery. “In healthy women, we know that exclusive breastfeeding induces lactational

amenorrhea and that this has a different immunological effect compared to combining breastfeeding with formula feeding; we wanted to investigate if exclusive breastfeeding and lactational amenorrhea had any impact on MS relapse rate,” Langer-Gould explains.

This small pilot study prospectively enrolled 32 pregnant women with MS, who were compared with 29 healthy pregnant women. The results were striking: of just over half the women with MS who did not breastfeed exclusively for 2 months, 87% had a postpartum MS relapse. The remaining 48% of women with MS who did breastfeed exclusively for this period experienced a much lower relapse rate of 36%. The exclusive breastfeeders resumed menstruation later than women who either gave up breastfeeding or combined it with bottle feeding, and lactational amenorrhea was significantly associated with fewer postpartum MS relapses.

“Most women with MS told us that the reason they either don’t breastfeed or start supplemental bottle feeding is to restart MS therapies earlier; it is unlikely that neurologists will change their advice based on this small study, but physicians and patients who are unsure of the best thing to do, or who want to encourage breastfeeding, may view these data as encouraging,” says Langer-Gould. In addition to confirming the findings in a larger study, the researchers are also continuing to analyze biological samples to try and identify what types of factors could be responsible for the protective effects of pregnancy and exclusive breastfeeding.

*Kathryn Senior*

**Original article** Langer-Gould, A. *et al.* Exclusive breastfeeding and the risk of postpartum relapses in women with multiple sclerosis. *Arch. Neurol.* doi:10.1001/archneurol.2009.132v