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Breastfeeding While Taking Seizure Drugs May Not Harm Child's IQ, Study Suggests

There's good news for women with epilepsy. Breastfeeding your baby while taking your seizure medication may have no harmful effect on your child's IQ later on, according to a study published in the November 24, 2010, online issue of Neurology®, the medical journal of the American Academy of Neurology.

"While more research is needed with larger numbers of women and their babies, these results are reassuring to women who want to give their babies all the benefits of breastfeeding but also need to remain on their epilepsy medications to avoid devastating seizures," said study author Kimford Meador, MD, of Emory University in Atlanta and a Fellow of the American Academy of Neurology (AAN).

The study followed 194 pregnant women who were taking one epilepsy drug. Of their 199 babies, 42 percent were breastfed. When they were three years old, the children were given IQ tests.

The study found that there was no difference in IQ scores between the children who were breastfed and those who were not. Those who were breastfed scored 99 on the test, while those who were not scored 98, which is not a significant difference.

The women were taking the drugs carbamazepine, lamotrigine, phenytoin, or valproate. Meador noted that more research is needed on the effects of other, newer drugs for epilepsy. The children whose mothers were taking valproate had lower IQ scores, whether or not they were

breastfed. American Academy of Neurology guidelines recommend that valproate be avoided during pregnancy due to risks of birth defects and effects on cognitive skills. AAN guidelines also recommend that women avoid taking more than one epilepsy drug at a time during pregnancy since taking more than one drug has been found to increase the risk of birth defects compared to taking only one medication.

Editorial author Autumn Klein, MD, PhD, of Brigham and Women's Hospital and the Harvard Medical School in Boston said that this is one of the first large studies on breastfeeding while taking an epilepsy drug.

"Many women are counseled not to breastfeed due to the lack of information on the effects of these drugs, but breastfeeding has many positive emotional effects for the mother and the baby along with the decreased risks for heart disease, diabetes, and obesity in the child and breast and ovarian cancer in the mother," Klein said. "This study highlights the pressing need for more data on epilepsy drugs in breast milk and the long-term effects."

The study was supported by the National Institutes of Health and the UK Epilepsy Research Foundation.