

NHS spends £40m a year treating illnesses in mothers and babies that breastfeeding could prevent

By Sophie Borland

The NHS spends £40million a year treating illnesses in mothers and babies which would be prevented by breastfeeding. A report said if breastfeeding rates rose, fewer babies would suffer stomach, chest infections and ear ache, while visits to GPs would drop and cases of breast cancer would decrease.

Breast milk is known to protect babies' health as it boosts their immunity while breastfeeding reduces a woman's risk of breast cancer later in life due to the release of preventative hormones.

Researchers found if breastfeeding rates rose, fewer babies would suffer stomach, chest infections and ear ache

Researchers from Dundee University and Unicef have assessed the benefits to families and NHS savings if breastfeeding rates increased.

They calculated that if 45 per cent of babies were breastfed for at least the first four months, costs would fall by just over £17million annually.

It would lead to 9,200 fewer babies being admitted to hospital with stomach or chest infections and the number of GP consultations would drop by 32,000 each year.

If half of mothers breastfed for at least 18 months of their life – nursing at least two babies – there would be 865 fewer cases of breast cancer a year. This would save more than £21million annually, making a total of nearly £40million for the UK.

Currently, 81 per cent of women breastfeed for the first six weeks, up from 62 per cent in 1990, after high-profile 'breast is best' campaigns.

Yet by the time their babies are three months old, only half still breastfeed. Only a quarter carry on for the recommended six months.

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The academics believe more could be saved as breastfed babies are also known to be at a lower risk of diabetes and heart disease later in life.

Professor Mary Renfrew, who led the research, said: 'It shows the NHS could save money from the immediate costs of treating acute infant diseases, and longer term savings from reduced incidence of breast cancer.

'There would also be considerable health gains for mothers and babies.

'It is clear that supporting women to breastfeed successfully would be hugely cost effective as well as preventing the distress and pain felt by a mother who has a bad experience of breastfeeding.'

Anita Tiessen, deputy executive director of Unicef UK, said: 'As a society, we are failing mothers and babies. Low breastfeeding rates are costing the NHS millions as well as causing distress for families.

'We want to see breastfeeding recognised as a major issue and appropriate investment and legislation to give mothers a better experience.'

Cathy Warwick, chief executive of the Royal College of Midwives, said there must be enough midwives and support workers to advise mothers during pregnancy and afterwards.

Not all women are able to breastfeed, particularly if they develop mastitis, a very painful infection.

Some mothers, including singer Myleene Klass, criticise what they claim are 'breastapo' tactics in some ante-natal classes. Last year, the National Childbirth Trust stopped advising mothers to breastfeed over fears it was alienating some women.