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## How Breastfeeding Affects Postpartum Depression

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# How Breastfeeding Affects postpartum depression

## Abstract

According to the 2008 CDC report, nearly one out of every eight women are affected by postpartum depression at one point or another in their lives. The purpose of my research was to study the potential effects of breastfeeding on postpartum depression. The objective was to study how breastfeeding affects the occurrence of postpartum depression in mothers in the United States. To understand the relationship between postpartum depression and breastfeeding, I read science journal articles describing the biological background behind breastfeeding and postpartum depression. I read psychology and biology journal articles dealing with possible forms of treatment for postpartum depression and how they may be affected by breastfeeding. Also, I read science journal articles dealing with the cause and effect relationship between the two. From my research, I came to multiple conclusions. First, breastfeeding does help to prevent and reduce the occurrence of postpartum depression. Although this is true, the cause and effect relationship between postpartum depression and breastfeeding depends on the situation. For example, for some individuals, lack of breastfeeding may cause the occurrence of postpartum depression. In other cases postpartum depression may cause the early cessation of breastfeeding. There is no definitive answer. After gathering all my research, there is still much research that needs to be conducted in this field.

## Introduction

Postpartum depression is a rather common occurrence in the United States, with nearly 12% of mothers being affected by it at one point or another in their lives. Postpartum depression can be defined as when a mother shows depressive symptoms that last for at least a month after giving birth. With postpartum depression affecting this large of an amount of people, it is of interest to discern what may be causing postpartum depression and how it may be prevented. Breastfeeding has been proven to provide benefits to both the mother and infant. Breastfeeding leads to the mothers feeling closer to the infants and developing an overall better relationship. Breastfeeding, also, has many biological functions that are helpful to the mother's body as well, such as lowering the levels of cortisol and retinoids in the body. Lastly, breastfeeding can help to synchronize the sleep patterns of the mother and infant, leading to overall lower levels of stress and higher levels of happiness. Although there is no definitive relationship between postpartum depression and breastfeeding in terms of which generally causes the other, breastfeeding has been proven to lower the rates of occurrence of postpartum depression because it lowers the levels of potentially toxic retinoids in the body and it serves as a stress reliever to the mothers.

By: Elisabeth Lamas, Mentor: Faye Prichard

## Methods

The purpose of the research project was to uncover the relationship between the practice of breastfeeding and the occurrence of postpartum depression. The primary sources used for research consisted of mostly science databases, specifically biology databases. The three main subcategories for this topic were the cause and effect relationship between postpartum depression and breastfeeding, the biological perspective, and some treatment methods. Multiple primary sources were found for each of these subcategories. These journal articles were analyzed and evaluated, and then conclusions were drawn from this research.

## Results and Discussion

My research project was successful. From the research I gathered during this experiment I determined that although there is no definitive cause and effect relationship between the occurrence of postpartum depression and the practice of breastfeeding, there is a direct correlation between the two. All of these studies that I researched found that breastfeeding is effective in reducing the chances of suffering from postpartum depression. This is for a number of reasons some of which have a biological explanation. For example, breastmilk contains very high levels of retinoids and when the breastmilk does not leave the body, these mothers may suffer from acute vitamin A poisoning which mimics depression. From an evolutionary standpoint as well, when mothers do not breastfeed after giving birth, they are sending their body the signal that they have lost a child, causing their bodies to respond with these depressive symptoms that are typical of child loss. The studies focusing on the relationship between pregnancy depression and the duration of breastfeeding often found that depression at some point during the pregnancy caused a shorter duration of breastfeeding and that the very initiation of breastfeeding and the longer that it continued caused a decrease in the occurrence of postpartum depression.



## Conclusion

From the research that was conducted, it was found the breastfeeding is successful in reducing the chance of the occurrence of postpartum depression. With this knowledge, doctors can inform their patients of this and emphasize the importance of breastfeeding. There needs to be increased awareness of the seriousness of postpartum depression and the numerous health benefits that breastfeeding has to offer both the mother and the infant. Some further research questions that need to be studied as well are why are some women genetically predisposed to be more likely to suffer from postpartum depression than others? Also, why are some women because of their genetics, more successful at breastfeeding than others? Furthermore, studies should be conducted to determine what is the best method to encourage the practice breastfeeding, as this would be the most helpful step in reducing the overall occurrence of postpartum depression.

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