

Breastfeeding for six months 'cuts the risk of dying from cancer by 10%'

- **Six months of breastfeeding your child cuts risk of dying from all cancers**
- **Women who breastfeed also 17 per cent less likely to die from a heart attack**

By Jenny Hope

Safer: A woman who breastfeeds her child is 10 per cent less likely to die from any form of cancer

Women who breastfeed for six months reduce their risk of dying from all cancers by 10 per cent, researchers say. They also cut their chances of death from heart attacks and strokes by 17 per cent. And following all the main recommendations for a healthy life reduces the risk of dying from a range of diseases by a third, the study found.

It looked at the contribution made to ill-health by poor lifestyles by examining how closely people complied with seven key recommendations to reduce cancer risk.

Researchers studied nearly 380,000 people in nine European countries over 12 years. They found that those who followed the advice from the World Cancer Research Fund/American Institute for Cancer Research (WCRF/AICR) most closely cut their chances of dying from several diseases by 34 per cent. The recommendations are to maintain a healthy weight, be physically active, cut down on foods and drinks that help increase weight, eat more plant foods, reduce consumption of meat and alcoholic drinks, and – in the case of nursing mothers – breastfeed for at least six months.

Dr Teresa Norat, of Imperial College London, who led the project, said: 'This large European study is the first that shows there is a strong association between following the WCRF/AICR recommendations and a reduced risk of dying from cancer, circulatory diseases and respiratory diseases. Now further research is needed in other large populations to confirm these findings.'

Those who most closely followed the WCRF/AICR recommendations cut their chances of dying from respiratory disease by 50 per cent, circulatory disease by 44 per cent and cancer by 20 per cent compared with those who the lowest level of compliance.

The recommendations with the greatest impact on reducing the risk of death from disease were being as lean as possible without becoming underweight (22 per cent lower risk) and eating mostly plant foods (21 per cent). Limiting alcohol consumption and following the plant food recommendation reduced the risk of dying from cancer by the greatest margin, 21 per cent and 17 per cent respectively. The study, published in the American Journal of Clinical Nutrition, is the first to examine breastfeeding as part of a combination of lifestyle changes to see what effect it has on risk of dying. It showed that women who breastfed for at least six months reduced their risk of death from cancer by 10 per cent and circulatory disease by 17 per cent.

Uncommon: Despite the proven benefits of breastfeeding for a longer period of time, less than two per cent of UK babies are breastfed exclusively for six months

Previous research found strong evidence that breastfeeding can reduce the mother's risk of breast cancer, with each year of breastfeeding reducing the risk of breast cancer by about 4 per cent. But only a small number of women in the UK breastfeed their babies for long periods. Less than two per cent of babies are breastfed exclusively for six months.

It was also the first time scientists have examined the relationship between adherence to diet and lifestyle recommendations and respiratory disease deaths.

Dr Panagiota Mitrou, deputy head of science at WCRF, said: 'This study demonstrates in real terms the value of the WCRF/AICR recommendations in preventing deaths from a range of common diseases, not just cancer. 'This evidence also highlights the importance of aspects of the Government's public health policy around increasing fruit and vegetable consumption, promoting breastfeeding and curbing alcohol abuse.'