

Letter to the Editor

Lactation and Breast Cancer. Are they Unrelated?

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IN WHAT has been considered the definitive study [1-3], MacMahon *et al.* [4] state "it is unlikely that lactation has any protective effect against breast cancer in women". The basis for this statement was the lack of difference in lactation history between breast cancer patients and control subjects in five diverse populations. The proper conclusion from this study is that lactation history had no effect on *subsequent* incidence of breast cancer in the populations studied. Before we conclude that lactation has no protective effect, we should evaluate the possibility that the initiation of breast cancer is reduced *during* active lactation. Numerous animal studies

show decreased breast cancer incidence during lactation [5-7]. In addition, Schaefer [8] found breast cancer to be extremely rare among Canadian Eskimos who commonly lactate continuously from ages 17-50. Lactation is an excretory process for chemical carcinogens [7, 9] and possibly also for neoplastic mutant cells [10] which would or could be stored in the breast in the absence of lactation. The diagnosis of breast cancer has been increasing among younger women [1, 11]. Since lactation represents a dramatic change in breast physiology which is natural, harmless and convenient, it should be carefully evaluated for a protective role against initiation of breast cancer before being ignored as irrelevant.

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