

DHA speeds visual development in breast-fed infants

16/09/2004 - Baby food fortified with the omega-3 fatty acid DHA speeds up visual development in breast-fed infants, report researchers this month.

Between six and 12 months, blood levels of docosahexaenoic acid (DHA) in breast-fed infants tends to drop due to lower DHA stores in mothers and the introduction of DHA-poor solid foods to replace human milk, say the researchers from the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center, Dallas.

In a randomized, clinical trial they investigated whether taking supplemental DHA in solid foods could improve the visual development of around 50 breast-fed infants.

At six months the infants were randomly assigned to receive either 1 jar (113 g) of baby food containing egg yolk enriched with DHA (115 mg DHA/100 g food) or a control baby food everyday.

Although many infants in both groups continued to be breast-fed, blood levels of DHA decreased significantly between six and 12 months of age (from 3.8 to 3.0 g/100 g total fatty acids) in control infants. In the DHA group, however, levels increased by 34 per cent from 4.1 to 5.5g/100g, report the researchers in this month's *Journal of Nutrition* (134:2307-2313).

Measures of the development of the retina and visual cortex, using visual-evoked potential (VEP) acuity, the researchers found them to correlate with DHA levels, supporting the need of an adequate dietary supply of DHA throughout the first year of life for neural development, they write.

These results are the latest in a series of studies that demonstrate the importance of DHA in the development of infants and children. Most leading formula makers already offer DHA-enriched versions.

Previously, children whose mothers took supplements of docosahexaenoic acid for the first four months of breastfeeding were found to perform better in attention tests than those without supplements, according to research presented at the Pediatric Academic Societies' Meeting in San Francisco this year.