

DHA supplements boost breast-fed children - study

- 06/05/2004 - Children whose mothers were given a dose of docosahexaenoic acid (DHA) for the first four months of breastfeeding were found to perform better in attention tests than those whose mothers were not.

The figures, presented at the Pediatric Academic Societies' Meeting in San Francisco, showed that five-year-old children whose mothers received a 200mg dose of DHA for the first 4 months of breastfeeding those children whose mothers received a placebo.

DHA is an essential fatty acid naturally present in breast milk, and is said to be a key building block of the developing infant's brain and visual system. It is also increasingly investigated for its ability to promote mental and cardiovascular health.

In the study, conducted by researchers at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, 174 mothers received either dietary supplements of DHA or a placebo. Their breastfed children were assessed for several visual and mental functions at 4, 8, 12, 18, 30 and 60 months of age.

The researchers report that at 60 months, or five years of age, the children whose mothers received DHA for the first four months of breastfeeding demonstrated an attention advantage, using the Sustained Attention Subtest of the Leiter International Performance Scale.

The same researchers had earlier reported (in April 2001) that the children whose mothers received DHA supplementation demonstrated enhanced psychomotor development at 30 months of age. The researchers did not notice similar effects on psychomotor development at five years, leading them to conclude that the earlier results may reflect more sustained attention rather than better motor function.

Demand for omega-3 fatty acids has surged in recent months on the back of increasing scientific evidence for its health benefits. Studies show that that intake of these fats can significantly reduce the risk of heart disease and related cardiovascular events. Omega-3 fatty acids also play an important role in mental health – they are increasingly added to infant formula to promote brain development – and evidence suggests that they could reduce risk of Alzheimer's disease.