Babies Unlikely to Get COVID-19 From Mothers' Milk

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For women who are worried about breast-feeding their babies after contracting the coronavirus, here's some good news: Transmission through breast milk is unlikely, according to new findings published in JAMA Network, the University of California (UC) San Diego News Center reports.

For the study, researchers at the UCSD School of Medicine and UCLA analyzed 64 samples of breast milk from 18 women with the coronavirus, officially named SARS-CoV-2, across the United States.

While one sample tested positive for viral RNA, additional tests revealed that the virus didn't reproduce and therefore couldn't cause infection in the breast-fed infant. The detection of bits of viral RNA alone does not signal infection because the virus must also be able to grow and multiply in order to be infectious.

"We did not find that in any of our samples," said Christina Chambers, PhD, MPH, director of the Mommy's Milk Human Milk Research Biorepository and a professor of pediatrics at the UCSD School of Medicine, who was a principal investigator on the study.

"We hope our results and future studies will give women the reassurance needed for them to breast-feed," said Grace Aldrovandi, MD, chief of the Division of Infectious Diseases at UCLA Mattel Children's Hospital and a professor of pediatrics at the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA, who was another principal investigator. "Human milk provides invaluable benefits to mom and baby."

Research shows that early breast feeding can reduce the risk of sudden infant death syndrome and obesity in children and improve their immune health and performance on intelligence tests. In addition, breast feeding has also been linked to a decreased risk for breast and ovarian cancer, cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes among mothers.

Scientists explained that they plan to conduct more research on breast milk for two reasons. One is to determine whether breast milk is free of the coronavirus. The other is to learn whether mother's milk contains active antibodies that women who've been exposed to the virus transfer to their babies during breast feeding.

The current recommendation for mothers to avoid transmitting the virus via breast milk is to

practice hand hygiene and sterilize pumping equipment after each use.

For related coverage, read “How is the new coronavirus transmitted?”

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