

### Transcript Details

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## Breastfeeding and PPD: The Evidence Behind the Connection

### Announcer:

Welcome to *Advances in Women's Health* on ReachMD. On this episode, we'll hear from Dr. Erin Henshaw, who's a licensed clinical psychologist and a Professor in the Department of Psychology at Denison University in Ohio. She'll be explaining what we know about the relationship between breastfeeding and postpartum depression. Here's Dr. Henshaw now.

### Dr. Henshaw:

Currently, what we know about breastfeeding and postpartum depression is that most research points to a bidirectional relationship. So not surprisingly, having postpartum depression or even prenatal depression is predictive of mothers having a more difficult time completing their breastfeeding goals; it can also be related to mothers being less likely to initiate breastfeeding.

Perhaps less intuitively, on the other side, we do have some evidence that breastfeeding itself can be related to reduced risk for depressive symptoms following the initiation of breastfeeding. So for example, mothers who are able to breastfeed exclusively over time have a slightly lower risk of postpartum depression over time. And for mothers who discontinue breastfeeding earlier than they had planned to, in particular, that seems to be a potential predictor for postpartum depression onset.

The key, though, is that there are a lot of other factors and variables that moderate this relationship. And for the specific mechanisms, we've got several different pathways that might be involved. It may be a bit of hormones in those pathways. It may be a little of the psychosocial stressors that go along with depression and breastfeeding. The bottom line is, there's a close relationship between the two, and each seems to influence the other in a fairly individualized way.

When we think about what breastfeeding might, involve that potentially protects maternal mental health, we have a couple different mechanisms that might be pointed to. So current evidence suggests that one place we can look is oxytocin. Oxytocin is released during the breastfeeding process, and evolutionarily, we link oxytocin to bonding, stress reduction, and improved mood in mothers. However, we also see that experience of oxytocin as mood improving and stress reducing may actually not be universally experienced by all women. So we have some evidence that in the context of already having postpartum depression, how oxytocin in breastfeeding is experienced may be different.

We also know that during the breastfeeding process, prolactin may promote some more relaxation and caregiving behaviors among mothers. But then we also can see that, for example, mothers who are breastfeeding may have more sleep disruption or physical demands. And so for those individuals, we may see that the physical demands of the breastfeeding—in some cases, the specific amount of time or one-sided, caretaking that might be involved in partnered caring for an infant—those things may also offset the benefits that breastfeeding might provide.

So on the one hand, more breastfeeding and exclusive breastfeeding may increase those protective experiences of oxytocin and prolactin. But on the other hand, there are some differential demands for mothers that might offset the positive experiences that come along with that protective biological mechanism.

### Announcer:

That was Dr. Erin Henshaw discussing the relationship between breastfeeding and postpartum depression. To access this and other episodes in our series, visit *Advances in Women's Health* on ReachMD.com, where you can Be Part of the Knowledge. Thanks for listening!