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Breastfeeding in the 21st Century – UK prevalence

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Conflict of interest

We declare no competing interests.

The Lancet Breastfeeding series¹⁻² provides compelling evidence that scaling up breastfeeding could prevent a substantial number of maternal and child deaths. The UK media interest in the series focused on the fact that only 0.5% of UK women are still breastfeeding at one year.³ We believe that this prevalence (Webappendix Table 4.2¹), which cites the 2010 Infant Feeding Survey (IFS)⁴, is incorrect.

Using published data (Table 2.11⁴), we have plotted breastfeeding prevalence up to 9 months in IFSs from 2000, 2005, and 2010 (Figure). In 2010, 34% and 23% of mothers were breastfeeding at 6 and 9 months respectively; the trend is unlikely to decrease to 0.5% at 12 months (Figure). Moreover, in Webappendix Figure 5.2¹, a country with a breastfeeding prevalence of 34% at 6 months is predicted to have a 10% prevalence at 12 months.

We corroborate this with independent, unpublished data from the Millennium Cohort Study of UK babies born in 2000-2001. The mothers reported breastfeeding duration at 9 months⁵ and 5 years postnatally. The prevalence of breastfeeding up to 9 months was almost identical in those interviewed at 9 months (n=18,756) and those who responded at 5 years (n=14,848). Among the latter group, 9.6% (95% CI: 8.7-10.4) reported breastfeeding at 12 months (Figure).

This potential inaccuracy will not affect the main findings of the papers.¹⁻² However, while UK mothers have one of the lowest rates of breastfeeding at 12 months, it is probably around 10% rather than 0.5%, hence displaying similar prevalences at 6 and 12 months to Canada, France, and the Netherlands.¹

References

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Figure legend

Prevalence of breastfeeding up to 12 months in the UK Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) and up to 9 months in the UK Infant Feeding Surveys (IFS) in 2000, 2005 and 2010.

Figure

