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Breastfeeding and risk of breast cancer: what is the evidence?

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Background and Aim: Breast cancer is the most common gynecologic malignancy in women. In Portugal, annually are detected about 6,000 new cases of breast cancer and 1,500 women die from this disease. Some studies suggest breastfeeding as a protective factor for breast cancer. However, this association remains inconsistent. The objective of this study was to review the evidence currently available on the association between breastfeeding and reduced risk of breast cancer.

Method: Research meta-analysis, systematic reviews and guidelines based on evidence, using the MeSH terms 'breastfeeding' and 'breast cancer' and the corresponding DeCS in the following databases: National Guideline Clearing House, National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, Canadian Medical Association Practice Guidelines, Cochrane and Pubmed. It was used the SORT scale (Strength of Recommendation Taxonomy) of the American Academy of Family Physicians for the allocation of levels of evidence and recommendation forces.

Results: From 79 articles, we selected 3 meta-analysis and 3 systematic reviews. Most studies show an association between breastfeeding and the risk of breast cancer, except for a systematic review which states that this association is not consistent. However, most of these studies have clinical and statistics heterogeneity, so most have a level of evidence two.

Conclusions: There seems to be some evidence regarding the association between breastfeeding and risk of developing breast cancer, which is limited by the quality of existing studies (SORT B). Will be needed more homogeneous studies about the methodology and interference of confounding factors and to evaluate other variables such as the duration of breastfeeding in reducing the risk of breast cancer. Even in the absence of strong evidence to protect against breast cancer, breastfeeding requires continued promotion due to their other benefits to mother and child.