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Letters

Breast-feeding and cancer

Again — an investigation into the causes of breast cancer with no comment on lactation as a factor ("Alcohol-Breast Cancer Link," SN: 5/9/87, p.292). The usual addenda are mentioned: obesity, heredity, child-bearing factors. A closing comment notes a higher incidence among "middle- and upper-class" women. It seems some additional pertinent questions need to be addressed.

Why has lactation never been the focus of a major study concerning breast cancer? Could some already identified "risk groups" — over age 25 first pregnancies, few or no children, upper economic status, even type and/or frequency of alcohol consumption — be related to the same sector of the population who bear first or only children later in life,

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Cover: This photo of the Soviet Chernobyl nuclear plant, taken by the French SPOT satellite shortly after the reactor's accident last year, was promptly made commercially available by SPOT officials. The possibility that U.S. media might want a similar satellite of their own for journalistic purposes, however, has raised issues ranging from national security to freedom of the press. (Images: © 1987 CNES, Courtesy of SPOT Image Corp., Reston, Va.)



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and often nurse those children for shorter periods, if at all?

I have noted only a single fleeting reference to an unidentified study, some years ago, where lactation was shown to cause a decrease in the frequency of breast cancer when a woman had nursed an only child for at least a year, or two or more children for at least nine months each. As a further point of investigation, lactation may affect maternal cholesterol and fat intake and the resulting bodily absorption of these substances. This could offer a relevant corollary to existing studies that have demonstrated a higher occurrence of breast cancer among women with high-fat diets.

Susan K. Olden-Stahl
Germantown, Md.

The current position taken by the National Institutes of Health is: "Contrary to earlier

beliefs, lactation does not seem to decrease the risk of breast cancer. What had appeared to be a protective effect from nursing now seems to have been a reflection of parity [childbirth factors]." The issue is still under study, however. Some recent research reported in the literature suggested a "protective effect," while other studies did not support a link between breastfeeding and breast cancer.

— D. D. Edwards

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