Breastfeeding has long been said to reduce the risk of developing allergies and asthma in childhood. However, a team of Canadian and New Zealand researchers recently used data from a longitudinal study to examine whether breastfeeding prevented allergy and asthma between 9 and 26 years of age.

The researchers looked at more than 1,000 children in New Zealand, who had been assessed every two to five years from the ages of 9 to 26 years. The information they collected included how long each child was breastfed, the age at which cow’s milk and other foods were introduced in the diet, the results of allergy skin tests, lung function and the presence of bronchitis, hay fever and asthma.

Forty-nine per cent of the children being studied were breastfed for at least four weeks while 51% were not. The researchers found that children who were breastfed were more likely to have asthma as well as allergies to cats, house dust mites and grass pollen than those who were not breastfed. This was not related to whether parents had hay fever or asthma.

Paediatrician Dr. Jack Newman started the first hospital-based breastfeeding clinic in Canada in 1984 at Toronto’s Hospital for Sick Children. “The major strength of this study is its long period of follow-up,” he says. Dr. Newman notes, however, that future research into the impact of breastfeeding on allergies and asthma should distinguish between babies who were exclusively breastfed for at least four to six months, those who were exclusively formula-fed and those who had both breast milk and formula.

“The study should never be used to tell women not to breastfeed. There are a hundred and one good reasons to breastfeed a baby,” says Dr. Sears. “The study says that preventing allergy and asthma might not be one of them.”

Dr. Sears notes that further research is needed into why breastfeeding seems to have the effects it does. “It is a signal to try and understand the mechanism of how allergies and asthma come about.”