Most health care professionals will tell a pregnant woman or new mother that "breast is best" for her baby. But ensuring that this sage advice is put into practice hasn't been easy. So the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) developed a ten-step "Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiative" (BFHI) that provides help, information and support for breastfeeding women. The program aims to increase both the length of time women breastfeed and the number of months babies receive breast milk exclusively.

However, the effectiveness of the BFHI has never been tested. It remains to be seen whether this ten-step initiative will increase breastfeeding rates.

Some researchers also question the benefits we attribute to breastfeeding (especially the supposed benefits of reducing the incidence of infection and atopic eczema) since the evidence for these benefits is based solely on observational (non-experimental) studies.

To address these issues, a multidisciplinary team of researchers set up the Promotion of Breastfeeding Intervention Trial (PROBIT) in the Republic of Belarus. It was the first multi-centre, randomized trial to measure the effects of a breastfeeding promotion program. The study also examined the health benefits of breastfeeding to specifically determine whether breastfeeding would reduce gastrointestinal and respiratory infections or atopic eczema. A total of 17,046 mother-infant pairs were enrolled in the trial. All mothers initially breastfed their infants. These mothers were then randomly divided into two groups, with one half participating in a breastfeeding promotion program (similar to the BFHI) and the other half receiving no such information or support.

The results showed that the women who participated in the breastfeeding promotion program were significantly more likely to be nursing at one year than their counterparts who received no support (19.7% versus 11.4%). Moreover, those who had received breastfeeding support were more likely to be exclusively breastfeeding at three and six months. Their infants were also less likely to develop gastrointestinal infections or atopic eczema. However, researchers found no significant differences in respiratory infection rates between the two groups.

Louise Dumas, a professor of Nursing at Université du Québec à Hull, was one of the three experts who assessed the only Canadian hospital to receive a BFHI designation, the Brom-Missisquoi-Perkins Hospital (Quebec). "The PROBIT study is a landmark," she says. "It is the first time researchers have been able to assess a BFHI-like program with control and experimental groups. However, while the study clearly demonstrates the effectiveness of a breastfeeding promotion program and the benefits of breast milk to the baby, implementing the BFHI in Canada has proven difficult. Factors such as extremely short hospital stays for new mothers, short maternity leaves and extensive advertising by [baby] formula companies make it difficult to increase breastfeeding rates."

The study highlights the importance of helping health care professionals (particularly doctors) increase their knowledge of breastfeeding. "Doctors, especially general practitioners and obstetricians, are missing out on training and information around breastfeeding," says Dumas. She is urging that further study be conducted on the implementation process of the BFHI. "We generally aren't able to put all [ten] steps into place at once. So let's see how people react to each step, where the resistance is and how people find solutions. Now [that] we know that the Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiative works, we need to know why we are having such a problem implementing it here [in Quebec]."