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1 **Maternal fatty acid desaturase genotype correlates with infant immune responses at 6 months**

2

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40

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42 acids; Mendelian Randomization Analysis

43 **Abbreviations:**

44 AA: Arachidonic acid

45 ALA : Alfa-linolenic acid

46 CD: Cluster of differentiationdGLA: Dihomo- γ -linolenic acid

47 DHA: Docosahexaenoic acid

48 EPA: Eicosapentaenoic acid

49 FA: Fatty acid

50 *FADS*: Fatty acids desaturase gene cluster

51 GLA: Gamma-linolenic acid

52 IFN: Interferon

53 IL: Interleukin

54 LA: Linoleic acid

55 LCPUFA: Long-chain PUFA

- 56 PBMC: Peripheral blood mononuclear cells
- 57 PC(A): Principal component (Analyses)
- 58 PUFA: Polyunsaturated Fatty Acid
- 59 SNP: Single nucleotide polymorphism
- 60 Th: T-helper cell
- 61 TNF: Tumor necrosis factor

62 **Abstract**

63 Breast-milk long-chain polyunsaturated fatty acids (LCPUFA) have been associated with changes
64 in early life immune responses and may modulate T-cell function in infancy. We studied the effect
65 of maternal fatty acid desaturase (*FADS*) genotype and breast-milk LCPUFA levels on infant's
66 blood T cell profiles and *ex vivo* produced cytokines after anti-CD3/CD28-stimulation of PBMCs in
67 6 months old infants from the COPSAC₂₀₀₀ birth cohort. LCPUFA concentrations of breast-milk
68 were assessed at 4 weeks of age and *FADS* single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs) were
69 determined in both mothers and infants (n=109). In general, breast milk arachidonic acid (AA)
70 levels were inversely correlated with the production of IL-10 (r=-0.25; p=0.004), IL-17 (r=-0.24;
71 p=0.005), IL-5 (r=-0.21; p=0.014), and IL-13 (r=-0.17; p=0.047), while eicosapentaenoic acid
72 (EPA) was positively correlated with the counts of blood Treg and cytotoxic T-cells, and decreased
73 T helper cell counts. The minor *FADS* allele was associated with lower breast-milk AA and EPA,
74 and infants of mothers carrying the minor allele of *FADS* SNP rs174556 had higher production of
75 IL-10 (r=-0.23; p=0.018), IL-17 (r=-0.25; p=0.009) and IL-5 (r=-0.21; p=0.038) from *ex vivo*
76 activated immune cells. We observed no association between T-cell distribution and maternal or
77 infant *FADS* gene variants. We conclude that increased maternal LCPUFA synthesis and breast-
78 milk AA is associated with decreased levels of IL-5, IL-13 (Type 2 related), IL-17 (Type 17-
79 related) and IL-10 (regulatory immune responses), but not to IFN- γ and TNF- α , which could be due
80 to an unconfounded effect of the maternal *FADS* variants on the offspring immune response being
81 transferred via breast milk LCPUFA.

82 Introduction

83 Long-chain polyunsaturated fatty acids (LCPUFA) in breast-milk, specifically arachidonic acid
84 (AA, 20:4 *n*-6) and docosahexaenoic acid (DHA, 22:6 *n*-3), may have beneficial effects on the
85 development of the immune system in breastfed infants ⁽¹⁾. This is speculated because LCPUFA's
86 are precursors of a range of immune-modulating signaling molecules ^(2,3). The diet is the most
87 important determinant of breast-milk LCPUFA content ⁽⁴⁾, but the content is also affected by the
88 maternal capacity to convert the precursor molecules to LCPUFA products ^(5,6) catalyzed by
89 desaturases and elongases.

90 Studies have reported that especially marine *n*-3 LCPUFA can modify immunological responses
91 and change the Th1/Th2 balance ^[7,8] also in infants ^[9,8,10] It has been suggested that such alterations
92 might have an epigenetic origin ^[11] thus imposing more sustained changes on the immunological
93 phenotype. *In vitro* studies have further confirmed the effect of LCPUFAs on cytokine production
94 and proliferation of T-cells ^[12].

95 Maternal intake of PUFA during lactation has been shown to modulate breast-milk DHA
96 content and the immune responses in infants in a number of observational as well as a few
97 randomized controlled trials ⁽¹¹⁻¹⁴⁾. However, assessing diet is connected to a high risk of
98 confounding interactions and the randomized trials have not been conclusive. Moreover, to our
99 knowledge, no one has reported on the influence of LCPUFA in breast-milk in relation to other than
100 Th1 and Th2 based responses, such as the IL-17-producing Th17, and IL-10 from regulatory T-
101 cells (Treg). Since most cytokines are produced by more than one cell type within peripheral blood
102 mononuclear cells, we will use the terms Type 1 immune responses to refer to cytokines produced
103 by Th1, cytotoxic T-cells, Natural Killer (NK) cells and innate lymphoid cells (ILC) type 1 (ILC1)
104 with cardinal cytokines being interferon gamma (IFN- γ) and tumor necrosis factor alpha (TNF- α),
105 while Type 2 responses are based on Th2 cells and ILC2 and the cytokines IL-4, IL-5 and IL-13.
106 Type 17 responses are based on Th17 and ILC3 producing IL-17A, and regulatory type responses
107 on regulatory T cells (Treg) and regulatory dendritic cells and monocytes, all producing IL-10.

108 Recent studies have shown that single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs) in the fatty acid desaturase
109 gene cluster (FADS) can affect maternal plasma and breast-milk PUFA composition (15,16). As the
110 genetic variants are "randomized" during meiosis, the FADS SNPs can serve as a randomizing
111 instrument independent of possible confounders (17). FADS have been shown to modify the effect
112 of dietary fatty acid intake on health, that including the allergic diseases in children ^[20]. Moreover,
113 it has been shown that the polymorphism of FADS genes can influence markers of the metabolic
114 syndrome, and was demonstrated to influence the plasma total cholesterol, High and Density Lipids

115 and triglycerides levels in children ^[21,22] and therefore modulate the risk of cardiovascular diseases
116 later in life. Further, these genes have been linked to neurodevelopmental outcomes in breastfed,
117 although the results are still not unequivocal ^[5,6,23,24]. Also in relation to the breast milk
118 composition, FADS genes seem to alter the effect of breastfeeding on risk of asthma, and for the
119 homozygotes of the major allele no significant effect of breastfeeding on the development of asthma
120 have been shown ^[25]

121 The aim of this study was to analyze the influence of maternal FADS SNPs on the profile and
122 function of T-cells isolated from infants at 6 months of age enrolled in the COPSAC₂₀₀₀ birth
123 cohort. We also analyzed the associations between maternal *FADS* SNPs and breast-milk LCPUFA
124 content as well as the association between breast-milk LCPUFA levels and infant immune
125 responses.

126 **Methods and materials**

127 ***Cohort***

128 The Copenhagen Prospective Study of Asthma in Childhood (COPSAC2000) is a single-center,
129 birth cohort study, with the objective to assess the interaction between genes and environment in
130 infants and young children with high-risk of asthma to identify early-life exposures with a putative
131 role in the development and course of atopic diseases. The cohort consists of 411 children of
132 mothers with asthma recruited between 1998 and 2001. Premature children (gestational age <36
133 weeks) as well as children suspected of chronic diseases or lung symptoms prior to inclusion were
134 excluded. The COPSAC study is conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and is
135 approved by the Copenhagen Ethics Committee (KF 01-289/96 and KF 11-107/02) and the Danish
136 Data Protection Agency (2008-41-1754). Oral and written informed consent was obtained from
137 both parents at enrollment ⁽¹⁸⁾.

138 ***Breast-milk samples***

139 Breast-milk samples (2-5ml) were collected at approximately four weeks post-partum. After
140 addition of 0.01% 2,6-di-tert-butyl-4-methylphenol (Sigma Chemical Co, St Louis, MO), the
141 breast-milk aliquots were frozen at -80°C. The analyses of the samples were completed within one
142 year after the collection. The FA composition of the breast-milk was determined by extraction,
143 KOH-catalyzed trans-methylation, gas-liquid chromatography (Hewlett-Packard Inc., Waldbronn,
144 Germany) and use of commercial standards (Nu-Chek-Prep Inc, Elysian, MN) as previously
145 described ⁽¹⁹⁾. Total values of the *n*-3 and *n*-6 PUFA families as well as the total of PUFAs were
146 calculated using the full set of 11 PUFAs ⁽¹⁹⁾, but in this study we focused on LA, γ -linolenic acid

147 (GLA, 18:3 *n*-6), dihomo- γ -linolenic acid (dGLA, 20:3 *n*-6), AA, ALA, eicosapentaenoic acid
148 (EPA, 20:5 *n*-3) and DHA.

149 *T cell phenotyping*

150 Peripheral blood mononuclear cells (PBMCs) were isolated by density centrifugation from 4ml
151 peripheral blood drawn at the 6-month routine visit (mean age at the visit 6.35, SD=0.64) to the
152 clinical research unit. The PBMCs were stored at -140°C for up to 12 years until the cells were
153 analyzed during 2011. The overall composition of the T-cell compartment in PBMCs was assessed
154 using flow cytometry with a predefined gating strategy: Cytotoxic T-cells (Tc; CD3+CD8+), T-
155 helper cells (Th; CD3+CD4+), and regulatory T-cells (Treg; CD3+CD4+CD127^{lo}CD25^{hi}). The
156 fraction of Tc- and Th-cells were calculated relative to total CD3+ cells, and Treg cells relative to
157 CD3+CD4+ cells. Briefly, the methodology was as follows: Unstimulated PBMCs (5×10^5 cells)
158 were washed once in FACS buffer (PBS containing 0.1% Sodium Azide and 1% heat-inactivated
159 fetal bovine serum). Cells were stained with a pre-titrated fluorochrome-conjugated antibody
160 mixture designed to characterize the T-cell compartment (CD3/eFlour450 (clone UCHT1),
161 CD8/FITC (clone OKT8), CD127/APC-eFlour780 (clone A7R34) (all from eBioscience; San
162 Diego, CA), and CD4/V500 (clone RPA-T4, BD Biosciences, San Jose, CA), CD25/PC7 (clone
163 B1.49.9, Beckman Coulter, Brea, CA). 400,000 cells were analyzed on a BD FACSCanto™ II flow
164 cytometer (BD Biosciences, Franklin Lakes, CA).

165 *Polyclonal T-cell activation and cytokine analysis*

166 PBMC (>95 % viable) were cultured in a concentration of 2×10^5 cells/200ul culture medium (RPMI
167 1640 containing 2mM L-glutamine (Cambrex, East Rutherford, NJ); 0.1M HEPES (Lonza);
168 100U/ml penicillin/streptomycin (Lonza) and 10% heat-inactivated fetal bovine serum (Cambrex))
169 in U-bottomed 96-well plates. T-cells were activated polyclonally by anti-CD3/28 expander beads
170 (Dynabeads Human T-Activator CD3/CD28, Invitrogen) added at a beads-to-cell ratio of 1:2.
171 Unstimulated cells were added culture medium alone. The PBMCs were stimulated for 40 hours in
172 a humidified 37°C, 5% CO₂ incubator and the response was assessed as cytokine production in
173 cell-free culture supernatants. Supernatant cytokines interferon-gamma (IFN- γ), tumor necrosis
174 factor-alpha (TNF- α), interleukin (IL)-17A, IL-5, IL-13, IL-10 and IL-2 were analyzed using a
175 custom multiplex assay from Meso Scale Discovery, and read on a Sector Imager 6000 (MSD,
176 Gaithersburg, MD, USA). The cytokine levels detected in unstimulated PBMCs were subtracted
177 from that of activated cells. All concentrations were above zero, also upon adjustment for
178 background cytokine production.

179 *FADS gene variants*

180 Using a QIAamp DNA Blood Maxi Kit (QiagenInc, Valencia, CA), DNA was purified from blood
181 samples of children and parents and stored at -80°C . Genotyping was performed in both the child
182 and mothers, by high throughput genome-wide SNP genotyping, using the IlluminaInfinium II
183 HumanHap550 BeadChip technology (Illumina, San Diego) as described previously ⁽²⁰⁻²²⁾ and
184 hereafter imputed by use of the 1000 genomes reference CEU panel as previously described ^[31].
185 Five candidate SNPs were chosen based on previous studies ⁽²³⁾ shown to be associated with PUFA
186 metabolism. To reduce redundancy and because these SNPs are highly correlated (all in linkage
187 with $r^2>0.5$), we took forward rs174546 and rs174556, the two SNPs that were originally genotyped
188 while the remaining three were purely imputed. The two SNPs furthermore had a high degree of
189 linkage disequilibrium with each other ($r^2=0.866$).

190 *Data handling and statistics*

191 From the COPSAC₂₀₀₀ cohort of 411 children, 90 infants were excluded as they were not breastfed
192 more than one month (n=38) or their mothers failed to provide a breast-milk sample (n=52). A
193 further 190 infants did not have data on T-cell immunology, leaving 131 infants with complete milk
194 and T-cell immunology data. Of these, genotyping data was unavailable in 22 mothers, resulting in
195 109 with complete data (Supplemental Figure 1).

196 Samples were handled in a random manner by the researchers performing the laboratory analyses.
197 Results are presented as mean \pm SD or median (25-75 percentile) for normally and non-normally
198 distributed data, respectively. Due to non-normal distribution of the cytokines, all correlations
199 between breast-milk PUFAs, *FADS* SNPs, cytokines and T-cell distribution were tested using the
200 non-parametric Spearman method. SNPs were analyzed in additive genetic models (effect per minor
201 allele). For tables genotypes were converted to best guess genotypes. The statistical data analysis
202 was performed with SPSS (version 20.0; SPSS Inc, Chicago, IL). To examine the patterns in the
203 cytokine profile we used Principal Component Analysis (PCA) performed using Matlab (version
204 2013a; Mathworks) and subsequently used the two first principal components as continuous
205 variables. Spearman correlations were used also to study correlations of the PCA scores and the
206 FAs, T-cells count and SNPs. The content of individual FAs are presented as a percentage by
207 weight of total FA content (FA%).Microsoft Office Excel 2007 software was used to create the
208 heat-maps illustrating the correlation patterns between breast-milk PUFA, *FADS* SNPs and
209 cytokines. The results were considered significant at the level $p\leq 0.05$.

210 **Results**

211 The baseline description of the study population compared to the infants with incomplete data is
212 shown in **Table 2**.

213 *Infant immune profiles at 6 months of age*

214 The T-cell phenotype distribution and mean *ex vivo* cytokine production after polyclonal activation
215 in infants at 6 months of age are represented in **Table 1**. The overall infant cytokine response was
216 analyzed by use of a multivariate principal component analysis (PCA) and the two principal
217 components (PC1 and PC2) were found to explain 74% and 8.5% of the variation, respectively.
218 PC1 separated the infants based on the overall level of cytokines produced, whereas PC2 segregated
219 infants with a profile dominated by IFN- γ (Type 1) and IL-2 from infants with a profile associated
220 mainly with IL-5 and IL-13 (Type 2), IL-17 (Type 17) and IL-10 (Regulatory cells) (**Figure 1a**).
221 We analyzed the overall cytokine profile in the infants in relation to the maternal *FADS* genotype
222 by color-coding according to the rs172556 gene variants. Some clustering of the infant cytokine
223 profiles appeared based on maternal *FADS* genotype, and PC1 (overall cytokine level) correlated
224 significantly with maternal gene variants of rs174556 (**Figure 1b and Figure 2**). The separation
225 was however far from complete and the associations was studied further by univariate correlation
226 analysis.

227 *Maternal FADS SNP effects on immunological responses in infants*

228 All individual cytokines were negatively correlated with the maternal *FADS* SNPs (Figure 2 and
229 **Supplemental Figure 2**); and the correlations were significant for IL-17 vs. both *FADS*, and for IL-
230 10, IL-5 and PC1 (which is a score for all cytokines production) with rs174556. No significant
231 correlation was found between *FADS* SNPs in the infants and the *ex vivo* induced cytokine
232 production (Figure 2).

233 *Breast-milk concentrations of PUFAs*

234 The overall FA composition of the breast-milk was 42.0 ± 4.3 FA% saturated fatty acids, 40.5 ± 3.4
235 FA% monounsaturated fatty acids and the mean total content of PUFAs was 13.7 ± 2.6 FA% with a
236 *n-6/n-3* PUFA-ratio of 6.0 ± 1.8 . The breast-milk PUFA distribution was associated with the
237 maternal *FADS* SNPs (**Table 3**), as minor allele carrying mothers of both SNPs had lower AA
238 levels in their breast-milk. The breast-milk level of EPA was also decreased in minor allele carriers
239 of rs174546 and tended to be so for rs174556, whereas no significant effects were seen on other
240 PUFAs. Notably, none of the PUFAs were found to be highest in breast-milk from minor allele
241 carriers.

242 ***Breast-milk PUFA and immunological response in infants***

243 Univariate correlation analyses of breast-milk PUFAs and *ex vivo* produced cytokines revealed that
244 generally breast-milk PUFAs were inversely associated with the cytokine production, except for
245 breast-milk EPA that was significantly associated with an increased number of Tc and less Th cells
246 and associated (although not significantly) with increased cytokine secretion from activated T-cells
247 (Figure 2). AA was inversely correlated with IL-10, IL-17, IL-5, and IL-13, and GLA was inversely
248 correlated with IL-17, IL-5, and IL-13.

249 When analyzing correlations between the relative numbers of Tc, Th and Treg in blood from the
250 infants and maternal breast-milk PUFAs, we found an overall negative correlation between all
251 breast-milk PUFAs and Treg counts; which was significant for dGLA and total *n*-6 PUFAs (Figure
252 2 and Supplemental Figure 2). As expected, PUFAs showed opposing correlations with %Tc and
253 %Th, but this was only significant for EPA, which was negatively correlated with %Th and
254 positively correlated with %Tc (Figure 2 and Supplemental Figure 2). The combined cytokine
255 profile from PC1 (Figure 1a and 1b) revealed a significant inverse correlation with breast-milk GLA
256 and AA, whereas PC2 was positively correlated with dGLA, but not with any other of the studied
257 breast-milk PUFAs (Figure 2 and Supplemental Figure 2).

258 Discussion

259 Our results showed that infants of mothers carrying minor alleles of *FADS* rs174556 had higher *ex*
260 *vivo* stimulated production of IL-10, IL-17 and IL-5 from PBMCs. We also found that higher
261 breast-milk LCPUFA content was generally associated with lower infant cytokine production. The
262 association was significant for AA and GLA levels, and IL-5 and IL-13, IL-17 and IL-10 (), but not
263 for IFN- γ . AA levels in breast-milk were associated with maternal *FADS* gene variants.

264 The main strength of our study is that unlike most studies on the role of PUFA in the regulation of
265 infant immunological responses, our study did not include oil supplementation, but rather focused
266 on maternal *FADS* genotype and natural LCPUFA concentrations in the breast-milk. Thus, our
267 study simulated a randomized study using the genetic variants as a randomization variable
268 independent of possible confounding factors (Mendelian Randomization Analysis). The accuracy of
269 our findings would probably be improved if we had performed repeated breast-milk sampling, to
270 rule out short-term fluctuations in LCPUFA content. Fluctuations are largest in the *n*-3 LCPUFAs
271 that to a greater extent depend on the dietary intake⁽⁴⁾ and thus also are more prone to confounding.
272 One limitation of our study is the relatively small sample size. Moreover, the long-term storage of
273 PBMCs have been shown to affect the *ex vivo* cytokine responses⁽²⁴⁾, but as all samples were stored
274 in the same way, and we found viability to be >95%, this factor is not likely to change the
275 associations with maternal *FADS* and breast-milk PUFAs.

276 We examined a large amount of associations, but did not correct for multiple testing due to the
277 strong correlations between the cytokines and between the SNPs and LCPUFAs, which allows for
278 treating them as non-independent variables; instead we focused on the consistency in the results to
279 exclude type-1 errors. A high consistency observed in described correlations is unlikely to be the
280 effect of chance. The same cytokines (IL-10, IL-5, IL-13 and IL-17) that showed to be significantly
281 associated with the GLA and/or AA were also significantly associated (borderline tendency for IL-
282 13) with maternal SNP rs174556. Furthermore, we found more association than would be expected
283 by chance.

284 The breast-milk fatty acid composition was determined prospectively 5 month before the
285 assessment of infant cytokine profile and a shorter period or simultaneous measurements might
286 perhaps result in stronger associations. However, the time gap indicates that the effect of infant
287 LCPUFA supply remains significant over time and that *in utero* or early PUFA intake may have a
288 programming effect on the immune response. Randomized trials with maternal *n*-3 LCPUFA
289 supplementation indicate that the former could be the most likely⁽²⁵⁾, while it cannot be neglected

290 that more long-lasting effects can be imposed on the immune system via epigenetic changes, as was
291 previously demonstrated for *n*-3 LCPUFA in the study by Lee et al. (2013).

292 *FADS* variants affect lipid metabolism and levels of specific PUFAs and served here as a
293 randomization instrument, which indicated that the observed effect of maternal polymorphism on
294 child's immunity could be due to changes in the breast milk LCPUFA. Experimental studies are
295 necessary to explore the putative causal effect of this association. Although both the associations
296 between maternal *FADS* SNPs and breast-milk AA and breast-milk AA and infant *ex vivo* cytokine
297 production were more pronounced than associations with any of the other LCPUFA, this does not
298 necessarily indicate that the effect is due to AA. Other studies of maternal *FADS* polymorphism and
299 the PUFA composition in breast-milk also indicate that the content of AA is influenced by *FADS*
300 variants to a larger extent than that of *n*-3 LCPUFA ^(26,27). A longitudinal study of *FADS* variants
301 and breast-milk PUFA found significant associations with AA and the AA/dGLA-ratio, but no
302 associations for *n*-3 LCPUFA ⁽²⁸⁾. However, Xie and Innis reported that *FADS* minor allele
303 homozygotes had lower breast-milk levels of both AA and EPA, but one of the examined SNPs also
304 decreased DHA ⁽²⁹⁾ and another study reported lower proportions of breast-milk DHA in *FADS*
305 minor allele homozygous mothers ⁽³⁰⁾. *FADS* SNPs have been found to influence changes in the
306 breast-milk fatty acid composition during the course of lactation, as the concentrations of saturated
307 and *trans*-fatty acids increase markedly over time in the milk of minor allele carrying mothers,
308 while no effect was seen on the time course in AA ⁽²⁸⁾. Colostrum AA levels have also been found
309 to be decreased in minor allele carriers of a number of *FADS* SNPs, but a few of the SNPs was also
310 reported to result in a decrease in colostrum DHA ⁽³⁰⁾. Furthermore, our recent study of *FADS* SNPs
311 and LCPUFA status in infants showed that the effect of various SNPs may differ and vary over time
312 ⁽³¹⁾. It is therefore, not possible to determine neither the timing of the effect nor the responsible
313 LCPUFA from the current study.

314 Studies on the role of breast-milk PUFA composition on offspring health have shown conflicting
315 results ⁽³²⁻³⁴⁾. Most of the studies investigating the effect of dietary PUFAs on infant cytokine
316 responses have focused on the effect of fish oil-supplementation. D'Vaz et al. ⁽⁹⁾ found that direct
317 supplementation of the infants with fish oil from birth resulted in decreased Th2-responses (IL-13
318 and IL-5) to allergens, and an increased polyclonal Th1-response as seen by increased IFN- γ and
319 TNF- α , but no effect was seen on the IL-17 in response to mitogenic stimulation of PBMCs at 6
320 months of age. Another study on a fish oil-supplementation of healthy infants from 9 to 12 month
321 of age demonstrated higher IFN- γ and a tendency for lower IL-10 production in stimulated whole-
322 blood cultures ⁽³⁵⁾. An increased production of IFN- γ was also observed in lipopolysaccharide-
323 stimulated whole blood cultures from 2½-year-old children of mothers supplemented with fish oil

324 during the first 4 months of lactation, but there was no difference in the IL-10 production⁽³⁶⁾. In the
325 present study, we observed significant changes in the production of IL-17, IL-5 and IL-13, which all
326 correlated negatively with breast-milk AA and GLA. EPA was associated with an increase in the
327 serum Tc% and concomitant decrease in Th as well as with an overall, although insignificant
328 increase in the infant cytokine production. As Tc% also correlated positively with IFN- γ levels, it
329 could be speculated that EPA may have an effect on T-cell immunology in the same direction as
330 observed in the fish-oil supplementation studies. However, with the indicated opposing effect of
331 EPA and AA and the enhancement of both EPA and AA by maternal *FADS* genotypes it will
332 presumably be difficult to observe a significant effect of EPA under non-supplemented conditions.
333 Regarding the potential effect of n-3 LCPUFA, the fact that the association with cytokine
334 production was mainly seen for EPA, rather than DHA, does not mean that only EPA is promoting
335 the effect, as EPA could merely be a better indicator of the variation in n-3 LCPUFA metabolism.

336 Studies have indicated an association between infant *FADS* variants and the development of eczema
337 and asthma⁽³⁷⁻³⁹⁾. These variants have similarly been shown to alter the association between
338 breastfeeding and risk of childhood asthma as well as the impact of dietary fatty acids on the risk of
339 asthma, which has been shown to be strongest among homozygous major allele carriers^(23,37). We
340 speculate that the altered capacity of cytokine secretion might influence predisposition for
341 development of immune-mediated diseases such as asthma. We have observed the association of
342 breast-milk PUFAs to be strongest in regard to reduction of the cytokines mostly attributed to the
343 activity of Type 2, Type 17 and regulatory responses as opposed to those from Type 1 responses .
344 Aberrant Type 2 cell responses is commonly associated with asthmatic inflammation and
345 additionally the Type 17 cytokines has been shown to enhance Type 2 cell mediated allergic
346 inflammation, contributing to severe asthma⁽⁴⁰⁾. Our results therefore, suggest that the decrease of
347 asthma and allergy risk by LCPUFA supply could be due to reduced Type 2 and and Type 17
348 activity in early life.

349 In conclusion, our results indicate that maternal *FADS* SNPs through a higher infant supply of
350 LCPUFA are associated with a decrease in the production of cytokines related to Type 2, Type 17
351 and regulatory immune activity in the infant. Furthermore, our results indicate that breast-milk n-6
352 and n-3 LCPUFA may have opposite effect and that breast-milk n-3 LCPUFA stimulate overall
353 infant cytokine production. By changing the type of the immune cell response, infant LCPUFA
354 supply could modulate the susceptibility of the child to immune disorders, such as asthma and
355 allergies, but further studies are necessary to elucidate the mechanisms.

356

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361

362 Conflict of interest statement

363 No authors declare a conflict of interest.

364

365 Authors Contributions

366 HB was responsible for design, initiation and conduct of the COPSAC₂₀₀₀ cohort. LL, HB, SBi, SBr
367 and EKM designed the present sub-study. JML conducted the PBMC activation analyses. MM and
368 SBi was responsible for the statistical analyses. MM and LL drafted the manuscript. All authors
369 contributed to writing of the manuscript, the analyses and interpretation of the data, and have
370 provided important intellectual input and approval of the final version of the manuscript. The
371 corresponding author had full access to the data and had final responsibility for the decision to
372 submit for publication.

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570

571 **Table 1.** Infant blood T-cell counts (as percentage of CD3+ cells) and *ex vivo* stimulated cytokine
 572 production (pg/mL) at 6 month.

573 Abbreviations: Tc- Cytotoxic T cell, Th- T helper cell, Treg- regulatory T cell, IFN- γ - Interferon
 574 gamma, TNF- α - Tumor Necrosis Factor alpha, IL- Interleukin.

	Median	25;75 percentile	Min	Max ⁵⁷⁵
%Tc	25.8	20.8;31.5	11.3	43.1
%Th	66.8	61.8;72.4	46.5	81.5
%Treg of Th	3.3	2.7;4.0	0.8	6.7
IFN-γ	743	409;1090	18.3	3270
IL-2	16158	6914;24358	5.3	809539
TNF-α	899	507;1360	19.0	2303
IL-10	37.0	17.2;68.4	1.0	247.3
IL-17	386	141;685	2.5	5136
IL-5	8.0	2.7;16.8	0.1	135.2
IL-13	207	87.8;387	0.3	1069

576 **Table 2.** Demographic characteristics of the studied infants and the rest of the COPSAC2000 birth
 577 cohort.

	Included (n=131)	Not included (n=280)	p
Sex (% male)	51.1	48.6	0.627 ¹
Gestational age (weeks)	39.95±1.61	39.88±1.55	0.634 ²
Birth weight (kg)	3.62±0.57	3.52±0.60	0.109 ²
Birth length (cm)	52.48±2.22	52.21±2.36	0.277 ²
Delivery (% natural, vacuum & cesarean)	62.6, 18.3 & 19.1	68.2, 10.4 & 21.4	0.080 ¹
Apgar Score at 5 min (% ≥9)	95.3	97.1	0.357 ¹
Breastfed period (weeks)	36.5±20.9	40.7±33.6	0.122 ²
Solely breastfed period (weeks)	21.7±25.6	39.3±50.2	<0.01 ²
Breastfed at blood sampling (% yes)	84 (64.1)	151 (53.9)	0.055 ¹
Solely breastfed at blood sampling (% yes)	13 (9.9)	12 (4.3)	0.044 ¹
Ethnicity (% Caucasian)	96.9	96.4	0.787 ¹
Low	81 (63.3)	144 (57.8)	
Mothers Education ³ Medium	31 (24.2)	69 (27.7)	0.593 ¹
University	16 (12.5)	36 (14.5)	
Unemployed	12 (9.4)	26 (10.2)	
Mothers Occupation Student	17 (13.4)	25 (9.8)	0.097 ¹
Non-professional	37 (29.1)	91 (35.7)	
Professional	61 (48.0)	113 (44.3)	
Mothers age (years)	29.73±4.25	30.17±4.68	0.364 ²
Fathers age (years)	31.71±5.00	31.52±5.25	0.730 ²

578

579 Data are shown as mean±SD or n (%)

580 ¹ Analyzed by Pearson's chi-squared test.581 ² Analyzed by independent samples T-test,582 ³ Low (elementary school or college graduate), Medium (tradesman or medium

583 length), High (university candidate).

584

585 **Table 3.** Breast-milk PUFA composition at 4 weeks post-partum in *FADS* SNP major allele
 586 homozygotes (MM), heterozygotes (Mm) and minor allele homozygotes (mm).

rs174546	mm GG (n=15)	Mm CG (n=38)	MM CC (n=56)	p
LA ¹	9.29±2.03	9.57±2.08	10.04±2.05	0.342
GLA ²	0.12 (0.08;0.22)	0.12 (0.06; 0.19)	0.16 (0.09;0.26)	0.215
dGLA ²	0.41 (0.37;0.49)	0.41 (0.31;0.50)	0.41 (0.35;0.45)	0.927
AA ¹	0.49±0.12	0.55±0.14	0.63±0.14	0.001
Total n6 ¹	10.79±2.26	11.17±2.23	11.83±2.27	0.186
ALA ²	0.19 (0.79;1.33)	1.33 (1.02;1.61)	1.26 (0.98;1.48)	0.502
EPA ²	0.07 (0.00;0.10)	0.10 (0.07;0.16)	0.10 (0.08;0.15)	0.028
DHA ²	0.41 (0.28;0.47)	0.46 (0.31;0.60)	0.49 (0.36;0.66)	0.124
Total n3 ²	1.93 (1.49;2.10)	2.03 (1.70;2.55)	2.08 (1.71;2.60)	0.237
rs174556	TT (n=14)	TC (n=37)	CC (n=58)	
LA ¹	9.17±2.05	9.72±2.04	9.95±2.08	0.443
GLA ²	0.13 (0.09;0.22)	0.12 (0.06;0.20)	0.16 (0.09;0.25)	0.310
dGLA ²	0.40 (0.36;0.50)	0.41 (0.31;0.50)	0.41 (0.34;0.45)	0.942
AA ¹	0.50±0.12	0.54±0.14	0.62±0.13	0.001
Total n6 ¹	10.70±2.32	11.32±2.19	11.73±2.30	0.283
ALA ²	1.22 (0.99; 1.39)	1.35 (0.98;1.62)	1.26 (0.97;1.47)	0.649
EPA ²	0.08 (0.04;0.10)	0.09 (0.07;0.17)	0.10 (0.08;0.15)	0.071
DHA ²	0.41 (0.31;0.48)	0.44 (0.30;0.60)	0.48 (0.36;0.65)	0.209
Total n3 ²	1.94 (1.51;2.10)	1.99 (1.70;2.55)	2.08 (1.71;2.55)	0.448

587 Data are given as % by weight of all breast-milk fatty acids; means±SD or if not normally
 588 distributed as median (25;75 percentile).

589 ¹ Statistical comparisons were performed by One-way ANOVA test.

590 ² Statistical comparisons were performed by Kruskal-Wallis test.

591 Abbreviations: LA- Linoleic Acid, GLA-gamma Linolenic Acid, dGLA- dihomogamma Linolenic
 592 Acid, AA- Arachidonic Acid, ALA- alpha Linolenic Acid, EPA- Eicosapentaenoic Acid, DHA-
 593 Decosahexaenoic Acid, PUFA- Polyunsaturated Fatty Acid.

594

595 **Figures' legends**

596 **Figure 1.** Multivariate principal component analysis of cytokines produced by *ex vivo* stimulation
597 of infant PBMC at 6 month of age. The data are shown as the score plot displaying the dispersion of
598 each individual (as each dot represents one individual) in regard to the combined production of the
599 seven cytokines color-coded according to the maternal *FADS* rs172556 genotype (black, diamond=MM,
600 light gray, square=Mm and dark gray, circle=mm). The cytokines separated as
601 shown in the inserted loading plot. Variance explained by each component is placed on the axes.

602

603 **Figure 2.** Heat-map illustrating the patterns in correlations between breast-milk PUFA, maternal
604 and infants' *FADS* variants (rows) and *ex vivo* induced cytokines, T-cell counts, as well as
605 combined cytokine profiles from PC1 and PC2, derived from Figure 2 (columns). White boxes
606 represent negative correlations and black boxes positive correlations. The saturation of the color is a
607 representation of the size of the Spearman correlation coefficients. Bold underlined values indicate
608 that the correlation is statistically significant. Results are presented as correlation coefficient with
609 the p value placed in the brackets below.

610