Human milk oligosaccharides in Chinese lactating mothers and relationship with allergy development in offspring

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Abstract

Background: The health benefits of breastfeeding are partly contributed by human milk oligosaccharides (HMOs), but there is limited data on breast milk (BM) HMO composition in Chinese.

Objective: This study investigated the association between early-life HMO intake and allergy occurrence in Chinese children.

Methods: 103 healthy Chinese pregnant women regardless of allergy history were recruited into this birth cohort. Their babies were followed until 24 months old. Concentrations of 2′-fucosyllactose (2′-FL), lacto-N-neotetraose (LNnT), 3′-sialyllactose (3′-SL) and 6′-sialyllactose (6′-SL) in BM collected at 1-month postpartum were measured by liquid chromatography-mass spectrometry. The associations between these HMOs and allergy occurrence by 24 months were analyzed by multivariate regression analyses.

Results: Twenty-nine percent and 19% of participants had eczema at 12 and 24 months old respectively. Eighty BM samples were analyzed, with 2′-FL being the most abundant HMO (median 1447 ppm, interquartile range [IQR] 291-1906 ppm), and median (IQR) levels of LNnT, 6′-SL and 3′-SL in ppm were 738 (580-950), 20.5 (12.7-38.8) and 23.0 (17.8-27.6) respectively. Participants with eczema by 24 months consumed BM with higher 2′-FL concentration at 1-month ($P = 0.008$), and also lower 6′-SL concentration in exclusively breastfed infants ($P = 0.012$) but higher 6′-SL concentration for those with mixed feeding at 1 month ($P = 0.043$). Food allergic children at 12 months consumed BM with higher 2′-FL concentrations at 1 month ($P = 0.048$).

Conclusions: BM 2′-FL concentration is higher in children who develops eczema by 24 months and food allergy during infancy. The relationship for 6′-SL is divergent depending on mode of feeding in infants.

Key words: Birth cohort, breastfeeding, eczema, human milk oligosaccharide, prevention

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Introduction

Eczema is the most common chronic inflammatory skin disease in children, which is also linked to the subsequent development of asthma, allergic rhinitis and conjunctivitis (i.e. atopic march). Breastfeeding has health benefits for the mother and child. Exclusive breastfeeding for the first 6 months of an infant's life is recognized as the "gold" standard

for infant feeding. Breast milk (BM) contains immunological components that protect against infections and allergic disease in infancy.[1] The composition of human BM is complex, containing factors that interact with the infant immune system and intestinal milieu including allergens, cytokines, immunoglobulins, polyunsaturated fatty acids, and chemokines. Microbial diversity of BM is intrinsic to healthy immune maturation of the breastfed infants. Besides, early-life nutrition exerts significant influences on the evolution and composition of stool microbiome.[2]

Apart from the passive transfer of maternal antibodies, the presence of diverse human milk oligosaccharides (HMOs) in BM exerts potent influences on early-life immune development. HMOs, forming the so-called milk glycobiome, are the third most abundant class of biomolecules found in BM after lactose and lipids, reaching between 5 and 20 g/L in mature human milk.[3] HMOs are composed out of only 5 different monosaccharides, namely glucose, galactose, N-acetyl-glucosamine, fucose, and sialic acid, being conjugated via several linkage types (i.e. glycosidic bonds).[4] The presence of this unique diversity of HMOs in BM suggests different biological functions and mechanisms by which they may influence the infant's microbiome and immune maturation. HMOs have the following main functions: (a) antimicrobial and antiviral effects;[5,6] (b) prebiotic effects;[7] (c) mucosal barrier maturation;[8] (d) modulation of pathogen recognition;[9] and (e) immunomodulatory effects.[10,11]

Fucosylated HMOs and N-glycans on milk proteins are also beneficial for the development of healthy gut microbiota. Bai et al. reported results of longitudinal research on paired milk and stool samples from 56 Chinese mothers and their breast-fed children.[12] Alterations in the levels of fucosylated HMOs and milk N-glycans were highly correlated with the growth of *Bifidobacterium* spp. and *Lactobacillus* spp. in the gut of infants during early and later lactation, respectively. Nonetheless, it remains unclear how the diverse HMO structures may protect against infections and allergies.

Based on the above observations, we hypothesized that dietary HMO intake would influence the postnatal development of eczema and allergy in Chinese infants. This study aimed to characterize HMO composition in BM from Chinese lactating mothers and to examine any association between exposure to major HMOs and occurrence of allergic diseases by 24 months of age.

Methods
Participants
This SMART Gen HK, an acronym for InteStinal Microbiota on Allergy, GRowth and DevelopmenT of the Next Generation in Hong Kong, is a mother-child cohort that recruited healthy Chinese pregnant women from November 2018 to May 2019. All newborns were delivered in our university-affiliated teaching hospital.[13] These pregnant mothers were not selected in relation to allergy status (i.e. standard-risk for allergy). Inclusion criteria included: (i) parents were ethnic Chinese by self reporting; (ii) singleton born at 37-41 weeks' gestation; (iii) no persistent dermatitis

within four weeks after birth; and (iv) no congenital anomalies or syndromal diagnosis. Pregnant women gave informed written consent to participate. Joint Chinese University of Hong Kong-New Territories East Cluster Clinical Research Ethics Committee approved this study (reference CRE-2018.252).

Participants' perinatal history, family history of allergies, socioeconomic background and environmental exposures were recorded.[14] They attended study visits at 6 ± 1, 12 ± 1 and 24 ± 2 months, when occurrence of eczema was diagnosed by pediatricians according to Hanifin and Rajka criteria.[15] Food allergy was diagnosed by pediatricians based on suspicious clinical manifestations together with positive skin prick test (SPT) and/or oral food challenges.

All participants underwent SPT with locally relevant allergens (cow's milk, hen's egg, soybean, wheat, peanut, mixed fish (cod fish, flounder, halibut, mackerel, tuna) and *D. pteronyssinus* (ALK Abelló AS, Hørsholm, Denmark)[14,16,17] as well as positive (histamine 10 mg/mL) and negative (normal saline) controls at 12 months old. Wheal ≥ 3 mm larger than negative control was regarded as positive. Participants were atopic when they had positive result to at least one of the above allergens.

Collection and processing of BM samples
Home visits were arranged at 4 ± 1 weeks postpartum to collect 10 mL BM samples expressed either manually or by breast pump from mothers who were breastfeeding their babies. These samples were transferred to laboratory on ice and stored at -80°C until analysis. Four HMOs, namely 2′-fucosyllactose (2′-FL), lacto-N-neotetraose (LNnT), 6′-sialyllactose (6′-SL), and 3′-sialyllactose (3′-SL), with commercially available standards (Glycom A/S, Horsholm, Denmark) were selected for measurement in this study. Briefly, the aqueous layer of raw milk was obtained after removing the fat and protein, followed by drying using rotary evaporation.[18,19] The dried samples were dissolved in distilled water and mixed with equal volume of 1 M $NaBH_4$ at 65°C for 1.5 hour, followed by solid phase extraction (SPE) using graphitized carbon cartridges. The SPE cartridges were washed, and HMOs eluted then lyophilized. The samples were reconstituted in 0.05 M NaCl solution and diluted before mass spectrometry (MS) analysis. Standards of the above four HMOs were reduced by $NaBH_4$, eluted by SPE and diluted by NaCl solution to plot calibration curves.

HMO detection and analysis
The extracted HMO samples were analyzed using Agilent 6460 electrospray ionization triple quadruple mass spectrometer equipped with Agilent 1290 liquid chromatography (LC) system. A porous graphitic carbon column (Hypercarb, ThermoFisher) was applied to elute different HMOs.[18] The column temperature was 40°C. Ten mM ammonium in 0.1% ammonia and 0.1% ammonia (v/v) in ACN were used as solvent A and B, respectively. LC gradient was set for a total run of 60 minutes with flow rate ranged from 0.1 to 0.15 ml/ml. MS analysis was operated in positive mode. Fragmentor voltage and collision energy were optimized based on different HMO standards.

Data processing and analysis

Univariate analyses by Mann-Whitney U test were conducted to compare HMO concentrations between different clinical outcome groups (e.g. eczema ever, atopy, food allergy) within the first 24 months of life. Multivariate analyses by logistic regression were further performed to confirm HMOs that were independently associated with eczema and other allergy outcomes, adjusting for covariates such as sex and mode of delivery. All analyses were performed using R version 4.1.3.

Results

Study population

Eighty-six BM samples were collected from the 103 mother-child dyads enrolled in this birth cohort. Six samples were subsequently excluded because the infants were found to be exclusively formula-fed before sample collection.

Table 1 summarises the demographics, feeding patterns, allergy diagnoses, and SPT results of 80 participants who were included in the current analysis. Sixty-seven (84%) of them were born by vaginal delivery, and two-fifths were exposed to intrapartum antibiotics. At one month of age, 51% of participants had exclusive breastfeeding while 49% had mixed feeding. Sixty, 63 and 54 subjects contributed allergy data at 6, 12 and 24 months old respectively. All these characteristics did not differ between children with and without eczema by 24 months old.

HMO concentrations in 1-month BM samples

In our cohort, 2′-FL was the most abundant HMO (median [interquartile range, IQR]: 1447 [291-1906] ppm) while BM samples contained lower levels of LNnT (median [IQR]: 738 [580-950] ppm), 6′-SL (median

Table 1. Demographics and clinical characteristics of study participants

Characteristics (N = 80)	Result
Maternal characteristics	
Received higher than secondary school education, n/N (%)	56/80 (70.0)
History of allergy, n/N (%)	10/80 (12.5)
Paternal characteristics	
Received higher than secondary school education, n/N (%)	47/79 (59.5)
History of allergy, n/N (%)	10/79 (12.7)
Child characteristics	
Male, n/N (%)	36/80 (45.0)
Gestational age (weeks)	39.1 ± 1.2
Birth weight (g)	3060 ± 393
Born by vaginal delivery, n/N (%)	67/80 (83.8)
Received intrapartum antibiotics, n/N (%)	32/80 (40.0)
Exclusive breastfeeding at 1 month, n/N (%)	41/80 (51.2)
Mixed breast and formula feeding at 1 month, n/N (%)	39/80 (48.8)
Exposure to household smoking at 1 month, n/N (%)	16/79 (20.3)
Furry pets at home at 1 month, n/N (%)	17/79 (21.5)
Allergy diagnosis, n/N (%)	
Eczema at 6 months	24/60 (40.0)
Eczema at 12 months	18/63 (28.6)
Eczema at 24 months	10/54 (18.5)
Food allergy at 6 months	0/60 (0.0)
Food allergy at 12 months	4/62 (6.5)
Food allergy at 24 months	4/54 (7.4)
Allergic rhinitis or asthma by 12 months	0/74 (0.0)
Wheeze episode by 12 months	5/74 (6.8)
Atopy revealed by skin prick test at 12 months, n/N (%)	11/58 (19.0)

Results expressed in number (percentage) or mean ± standard deviation.

Table 2. Relationship between HMO concentrations and selected demographic factors and perinatal exposures.

Variable	No. of subjects	Total HMO		2'-FL		LNnT		6'-SL		3'-SL	
		Median (IQR)	P	Median (IQR)	P	Median (IQR)	P	Median (IQR)	P	Median (IQR)	P
Maternal educational level											
Secondary school	24	2228 (1877-2673)	0.705	1369 (28.3-1862)	0.469	682 (553-1040)	0.867	29.4 (16.4-42.8)	0.061	24.8 (19.8-29.9)	0.115
Higher than secondary school	56	2298 (1922-2809)		1536 (839-1906)		758.6 (602-914)		19.4 (10.6-35.2)		21.3 (16.7-26.9)	
Maternal history of allergy											
No	70	2258 (1907-2786)	0.716	1429 (42.4-1929)	0.694	724 (562-1005)	0.476	20.2 (12.2-39.2)	0.565	22.3 (17.5-27.4)	0.816
Yes	10	2455 (1992-2595)		1601 (1336-1841)		900 (658-920)		26.3 (16.1-36.8)		24.7 (18.9-27.5)	
Intrapartum antibiotics											
No	48	2256 (1905-2594)	0.473	1429 (753-1814)	0.371	735 (554-909)	0.768	21.1 (13.1-37.9)	0.694	24.4 (19.1-27.8)	0.243
Yes	32	2324 (1921-2924)		1565 (43.5-1998)		761 (594-980)		19.8 (10.5-38.8)		20.9 (17.1-26.4)	
Sex of child											
Male	36	2229 (1928-2614)	0.542	1377 (290-1817)	0.575	686 (586-991)	0.656	21.1 (10.3-35.7)	0.908	22.7 (18.0-26.9)	0.656
Female	44	2354 (1889-2883)		1545 (556-1938)		802 (580-914)		19.4 (13.1-39.4)		23.2 (17.8-27.9)	
Mode of delivery											
Vaginal birth	67	2238 (1798-2631)	0.067	1390 (41.3-1832)	**0.035**	726 (552-928)	0.681	21.2 (12.5-39.0)	0.506	23.5 (18.3-27.7)	0.422
Caesarean section	13	2497 (2168-2939)		1872 (1378-2171)		758 (632-968)		17.8 (14.2-23.2)		21.3 (16.8-25.2)	

2'-FL, 2'-fucosyllactose; HMO, human milk oligosaccharide; IQR, interquartile range; LNnT, lacto-N-neotetraose; 3'-SL, 3'-sialyllactose; 6'-SL, 6'-sialyllactose.
HMO concentrations were expressed in parts per million (ppm).
P-value < 0.05 was highlighted in bold.

[IQR]: 20.5 [12.7-38.8] ppm) and 3′-SL (median [IQR]: 23.0 [17.8-27.6] ppm). Mothers delivering babies by caesarean section had a higher level of 2′-FL in their BM ($P = 0.035$) (**Table 2**), while demographic factors and other perinatal exposures were not associated with the concentrations of these four HMOs. **Figure 1** shows heatmap on Spearman correlations between maternal age and levels of four individual and total HMOs. Total HMO level correlated significantly with 2′-FL level ($P < 0.001$). On the other hand, there was no significant correlation among four HMO levels or between maternal age and their levels.

Eczema development and early-life HMO exposures

Twenty-two (41%) of 54 participants seen at 24 months of age had eczema within the first two years. **Table 3** summarizes HMO concentrations in participants with and without eczema in the first two years of life. Compared to those never diagnosed with eczema, participants who developed eczema had consumed BM at 1-month that contained significantly higher 2′-FL concentration ($P = 0.006$). This finding remained significant by logistic regression analysis following adjustment for mode of delivery and feeding pattern at 1 month (odds ratio [OR] 1.001 and 95% confidence interval [CI] 1.000-1.002; adjusted $P = 0.010$). Those lost to follow up had similar HMOs as children with eczema. **Table 4** describes HMO concentrations in infant subgroups with different feeding patterns. The difference in BM 2′-FL levels in participants with and without eczema by 24 months was significant only in those exclusively breastfed at 1 month ($P = 0.046$). In addition, participants with eczema ever consumed BM with lower 6′-SL concentration among the subgroup of infants who were exclusively breastfed ($P = 0.012$). On the other hand, participants with mixed feeding at 1 month who developed eczema within two years consumed BM that contained higher levels of 6′-SL ($P = 0.043$). The total HMO concentration was higher in those with eczema by 24 months only in participants who received mixed feeding at 1 month ($P = 0.040$).
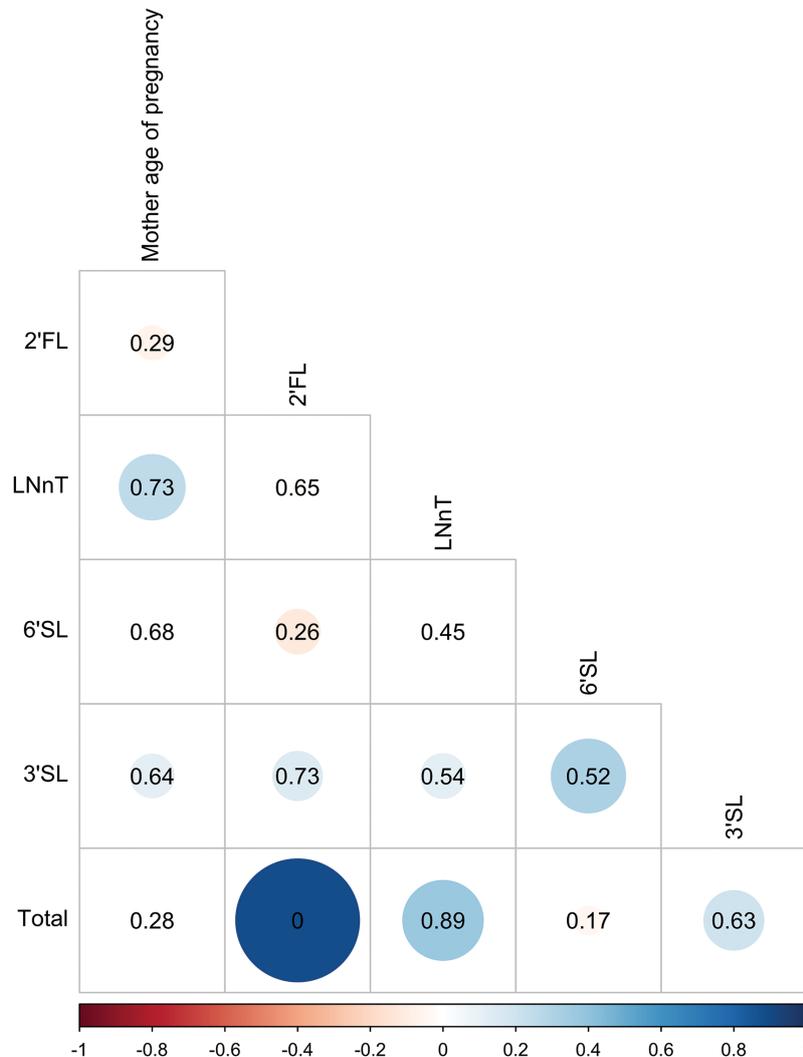

Figure 1. Heatmap on the Spearman correlation between maternal age and levels of four individual and total HMOs. A darker and larger circle represents that higher Spearman correlation coefficient, while the corresponding *P*-value is shown in the centre of each circle. 2′-FL, 2′-fucosyllactose; LNnT, lacto-N-neotetraose; 3′-SL, 3′-sialyllactose; 6′-SL, 6′-sialyllactose.

Table 3. Concentrations of HMOs in breast milk consumed by participants with and without eczema development in the first two years of life.

HMO	Never eczema within 24 months (N = 32)	Eczema ever within 24 months (N = 22)	*P*
2′-FL	1030 (25.4-1627)	1613 (1330-1951)	**0.006**
LNnT	631 (483-984)	859 (731-912)	0.175
6′-SL	26.8 (10.6-39.4)	19.4 (14.3-37.8)	0.705
3′-SL	21.2 (17.0-26.2)	23.3 (18.1-27.0)	0.573
Total	2048 (1057-2427)	2467 (2021-2877)	**0.013**

2′-FL, 2′-fucosyllactose; HMO, human milk oligosaccharide; LNnT, lacto-N-neotetraose; 3′-SL, 3′-sialyllactose; 6′-SL, 6′-sialyllactose.
Results expressed in median (interquartile range).
HMO concentrations were expressed in parts per million (ppm).
P-value < 0.05 was highlighted in bold.

Table 4. HMO concentrations in breast milk among participants with different early-life feeding patterns at one month who had or did not have eczema by 24 months.

HMO	Exclusive breastfeeding			Mixed feeding		
	Never eczema (N = 17)	Eczema ever (N = 11)	*P*	Never eczema (N = 15)	Eczema ever (N = 11)	*P*
2′-FL	1177 (15.8-1810)	1872 (1462-1948)	**0.046**	883 (28.1-1470)	1561 (1214-1826)	0.052
LNnT	632 (550-1103)	795 (561-902)	0.981	631 (421-926)	864 (798-1009)	0.092
6′-SL	35.2 (21.2-40.6)	19.3 (11.4-21.4)	**0.012**	10.7 (4.72-26.8)	35.2 (14.6-45.1)	**0.043**
3′-SL	24.8 (20.9-27.7)	19.1 (14.9-25.8)	0.359	18.7 (13.8-22.7)	25.1 (20.2-28.0)	0.073
Total	2218 (1679-2435)	2549 (2072-2788)	0.138	1991 (478-2306)	2356 (2060-2887)	**0.040**

2′-FL, 2′-fucosyllactose; HMO, human milk oligosaccharide; LNnT, lacto-N-neotetraose; 3′-SL, 3′-sialyllactose; 6′-SL, 6′-sialyllactose.
Results expressed in median (interquartile range).
HMO concentrations were expressed in parts per million (ppm).
P-value < 0.05 was highlighted in bold.

Table 5. Concentrations of HMOs in breast milk consumed by participants with and without atopy or food allergy at the age of 12 months.

HMO	Atopy*			Food allergy		
	Yes (N = 11)	No (N = 47)	*P*	Yes (N = 4)	No (N = 58)	*P*
2′-FL	1561 (1206-1851)	1463 (39.2-1903)	0.532	2005 (1849-2223)	1447 (471-1863)	**0.032**
LNnT	759 (548-952)	712 (590-900)	0.866	899 (830-980)	682 (549-886)	0.122
6′-SL	17.8 (11.3-31.9)	19.5 (12.5-38.4)	0.545	31.8 (19.7-37.7)	19.5 (13.0-34.9)	0.774
3′-SL	24.9 (20.6-27.3)	21.9 (16.6-27.4)	0.388	21.9 (16.8-25.8)	24.0 (18.3-27.5)	0.753
Total	2218 (1924-2912)	2276 (1773-2618)	0.627	2983 (2823-3184)	2233 (1894-2578)	**0.012**

2′-FL, 2′-fucosyllactose; HMO, human milk oligosaccharide; LNnT, lacto-N-neotetraose; 3′-SL, 3′-sialyllactose; 6′-SL, 6′-sialyllactose.
Results expressed in median (interquartile range).
HMO concentrations were expressed in parts per million (ppm).
P-values < 0.05 were highlighted in bold.
* Defined by ≥ 1 positive skin prick tests.

Food allergy and HMO intake at 1 month

At 12 months of age, 11 (19%) of participants were atopic as revealed by SPT. **Table 5** illustrates HMO concentrations in relation to atopy and food allergy. No significant association was detected between atopy and concentrations of four HMOs in BM at 1 month. Four participants had food allergy at 12 months. These food allergic participants consumed BM that contained higher 2′-FL concentrations at 1 month by univariate ($P = 0.032$) and logistic regression analyses (OR 1.003 and 95%CI 1.000-1.005; adjusted $P = 0.048$). The total HMO concentration was also higher in infants with food allergy ($P = 0.012$).

Discussion

In this birth cohort, we measured the levels of four HMOs namely 2′-FL, LNnT, 3′-SL and 6′-SL in 1-month BM sample from 80 healthy Chinese pregnant women regardless of allergy history and followed their offspring until 24 months old. 2′-FL was the most abundant HMO followed by LNnT, 3′-SL and 6′-SL. Participants who developed eczema by 24 months consumed BM with higher 2′-FL concentration. Eczema was associated with lower 6′-SL level in exclusively breastfed infants but higher 6′-SL concentration for those with mixed feeding. Besides, food allergic children at 12 months consumed BM with higher 2′-FL level. These results supported some allergy-modifying effects of early-life HMO exposure.

Over 150 HMOs have been identified and their concentrations in human milk vary depending on Secretor and Lewis blood group status, environmental and geographical factors, lactation stage, gestational period, and maternal health. These non-digestible HMOs are vital for healthy neonatal microbial colonization, immune development, immunomodulatory effects and development of the neonatal mucosa.[5-11] In this study, we found 2′-FL to be much higher than LNnT, 3′-SL and 6′-SL (respective medians 1447 ppm, 738 ppm, 23.0 ppm and 20.5 ppm). Among Caucasians, Conze and coworkers reported the mean reference levels of 2′-FL, 3′-SL and 6′-SL to be 2580 ppm, 280 ppm and 390 ppm.[20] Another study from Australia measuring 19 HMOs found median levels of 2′-FL, LNnT, 3′-SL and 6′SL to be 2193 ppm, 490 ppm, 242 ppm and 408 ppm respectively.[21] While LNnT level appeared to be higher in the BM of our Chinese mothers (738 ppm vs 490 ppm), the BM levels of 2′-FL, 3′-SL and 6′-SL reported in these two Caucasian studies were much higher than those of our Chinese mothers. Knowing the ethnic-specific reference HMO levels would help to determine the level of appropriate HMO supplementation in infant formulae.

Although infant formulae are successful in providing adequate nutrition for those infants who cannot receive BM, these formulae lack many components such as HMOs and specific antibodies that are tailor made by each mother for the immune imprinting of her baby. Thus, many formula milk companies have been trying to replenish some specific prebiotic oligosaccharides such as short chain galacto- and long chain fructooligosaccharides (scGOS/lcFOS) and HMOs such as 2′-FL. Firstly, several studies confirmed that such HMO supplementation was safe.[22-24] On the other hand, our recent single-center, randomized, double-blind controlled trial failed to detect any benefit of 2′-FL-supplemented growing-up milk formula in preventing respiratory and gastrointestinal infections in Chinese toddlers over a 6-month study period.[25] It remained unclear if 2′-FL is ineffective, its dose inadequate or that such strategy should better be applied in young infants when formula milk is the main source of nutrient intake.[26,27] A multi-center observational cohort named "Protecting against Respiratory tract infections through human Milk Analysis" (PRIMA) is underway to identify novel functions of components in human milk that are protective against respiratory tract infections and allergic diseases early in life.[28]

The effects of various HMOs on allergy prevention have been inconsistently observed. Siziba and coworkers investigated the effect of HMOs, measured at 6 weeks and 6 months postnatally during lactation, on the development of allergies by two years of age.[29] They found 6-week LNnT to be associated with eczema at 2 years and 6-month 3′-SL among non-secretor mothers to be associated with eczema at 1 year. However, these associations became insignificant after adjusting for multiple testing. A study of BM from 266 mothers who participated in the placebo group of a randomized placebo-controlled trial of prebiotics and probiotics showed significant association between eczema and caesarean section at 2 years when adjusted for BM 2′-FL levels.[30] However, such association became insignificant when children reached 5 years old. Lodge et al. examined the relationship between HMO profiles from 285 mothers and allergic diseases of offspring up to 18 years of age in the high-allergy-risk Melbourne Atopy Cohort Study.[21] Nineteen HMOs were measured, and latent class analysis revealed seven distinct maternal milk profiles. Compared with offspring exposed to the neutral Lewis HMO profile, exposure to acidic Lewis HMOs was associated with a higher risk of asthma at 18 years. Exposure to the acidic-predominant profile was associated with a reduced risk of food sensitization at 12 years. The present observational study supported allergy-modifying effects of HMO exposure at 1-month by finding positive association between 2′-FL level and eczema by 24 months and divergent associations between eczema and 6′-SL level depending on infants' mode of feeding. Food allergy at 12 months was also associated with higher 2′-FL level. Nonetheless, we found that elevated levels of total HMO and 2′-FL in 1-month BM were associated with increased risks of eczema and food allergy. This counterintuitive association might be due to the lack of confounding genotyping data on maternal ABO secretory blood groups which modulated such relationship. Our findings for HMOs will need to be replicated in larger cohort (e.g. PRIMA[28]) and in randomized controlled trials.

Microbes are found in abundance in BM, and recent studies have suggested an entero-mammary route of microbial transfer. Pannaraj et al. studied possible vertical transfer of bacteria from mother to infant by breastfeeding.[31] They performed 16S rRNA sequencing of BM, areolar skin and infant stool samples in 107 healthy US mother-infant pairs. The infant gut microbial communities were closely related to own mother's BM and skin. Bacterial diversity and composition changes in infant gut microbiome were associated with the proportion of daily BM intake in a dose-dependent manner, even after the introduction of solid foods. This observation opens up the possibility of infant gut microbiota modulation through maternal probiotic supplementation. Nonetheless, another study yielded contradictory results.[32] Another possibility was the modulation of infant gut microbiota by HMOs. Different types of HMOs would influence the proliferation and increase the percentage of particular microbial strains in the gut. For example, increase in 2′-FL and decrease in 6′-SL affected gut microbiota composition that modulated the risk of allergy development.

Some reports suggested association between BM microbiota and allergic diseases. A study involving 202 mother-infant dyads found that the abundance and evenness of BM microbiota and the number of differential bacteria were higher in children without food allergy than in those from the food allergy group.[33] Importantly, changes in *Bifidobacterium* abundance were consistent with those in the BM flora. Grönlund et al. also assessed the association between maternal BM and fecal Bifidobacteria at 30-35 weeks of gestation and infants' fecal Bifidobacteria at one month of age in 61 mother-infant pairs.[34] *Bifidobacterium longum* was the most frequently detected species in BM. Allergic mothers had lower amounts of Bifidobacteria in BM compared with non-allergic mothers, and their infants had concurrently lower counts of Bifidobacteria in feces. Dzidic et al. determined BM microbiota in relation to allergy development in 40 children participating in an intervention trial with pre- and post-natal *Lactobacillus reuteri* supplementation.[35] They reported that BM fed to children developing allergic manifestations by 7 years old had lower bacterial richness when compared to that given to children who remained healthy. Overall, the results suggested that consumption of BM with a reduced microbial richness in early-life plays an important role in allergy development during childhood.

This study has several limitations. First, this study has not determined participants' polymorphic alleles of two fucosyltransferases FUT2 (secretor gene) and FUT3 (Lewis gene) that are responsible for transferring fucose and determining variations of specific HMOs and profiles.[30] FUT2 gene encodes fucosyltransferase (FucT) II, which catalyze the formation of α-1-2-fucosylated HMOs (majority will be 2′FL, followed by LNFP I, DFL and Tetra-LND III in rather low abundance). Thus, mothers with high expression of FULT2 gene would be categorized as secretor while the low expression is non-secretor. Nonetheless, our approach of measuring individual HMO levels would be a direct way for testing their associations with various clinical allergy phenotypes that obviates the need to determine these confounding fucosyltransferase genotypes. In addition, this study cannot evaluate the longitudinal effects of postnatal HMO exposures on allergy outcomes as we only collected one BM sample at 1-month after birth. Furthermore, we measured the levels of only four HMOs which precluded the analyses for various secretor and Lewis HMO profiles identified by an extended array of HMOs as reported in the Melbourne Atopy Cohort.[21] Despite this, this study can still detect significant associations between eczema and 2′-FL and 6′-SL levels in 1-month BM samples among Chinese infants. Another drawback relates to the lack of BM microbiota data that our participants were exposed in early-life.[33-35] It would be interesting to analyze the possible relationship between HMOs and microbiota in our BM samples and if both might expert synergistic effects on allergy development in the offspring.

In conclusion, this study found levels of major HMOs in BM from Chinese mothers to be different from those of Caucasians. Besides, the levels of 2′-FL and 6′-SL in 1-month BM samples are associated with risks of eczema and food allergy in Chinese children. Additional studies that measured the full HMO composition over multiple postnatal time points are necessary to validate their relationship with childhood allergic diseases.

Author Contributions

- TFL obtained research funding, designed this study, collected clinical data and drafted this manuscript.
- YC collected clinical data, collected and processed BM samples, analyzed study data and drafted this manuscript.
- ASYL followed subjects, collected clinical data and analyzed study data.
- AJC and MSW designed and performed HMO measurement.
- KCCC, MKC and NSC collected clinical data.
- PKSC and WHT obtained research funding, designed this study and supervised research staff.
- All authors reviewed and approved the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

All authors declared no competing interest.

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