



PERCEPTIONS AND PRACTICES OF BREASTFEEDING

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ABSTRACT

Aim: To review the prevailing myths, beliefs and practices in society relating to breastfeeding and complementary feeding in infants.

Method: A prospective study was carried out on women coming to the department of obstetrics and gynaecology of our college with the help of a pre-formed questionnaire.

Result: Only 54% women in our study population had held their baby for the first time within 1st hr of birth. 27% women believed that cow or buffalo milk is equivalent to human milk. 84% women were not aware that breast milk can be stored for later use.

Conclusion: Majority of the women are unaware about correct breast feeding practices and those aware of it do not have the correct or complete information. Breast feeding practices need to be improved by busting myths and providing complete and correct information to women.

KEYWORDS : Breast feeding, Knowledge, Attitude, Awareness

INTRODUCTION

Breast feeding is an unequalled way of providing ideal food for the healthy growth and development of infants. It is also an integral part of the reproductive process with important implications for the health of mother. Children who are exclusively breastfed for six months have a lower risk for gastrointestinal infections, respiratory illness, poor linear growth and cognitive impairment¹. Exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of life followed by nutritionally adequate and safe complementary foods with continued breastfeeding up to two years of age or beyond is the recommended practice by World Health Organisation and American Academy of Pediatrics². The National Family Health Survey-4 data released in 2015-16 has revealed that only 41.6% newborn in India are given breast milk within first hour of birth³. Given the consequences of poor breastfeeding practices, it is important to make interventions to reduce the gap still present between the breastfeeding recommendations and the actual practices. Thus this study aimed to review the prevailing myths, beliefs and practices in society relating to breastfeeding and complementary feeding in infant.

METHODS

A prospective observational study was conducted in the department of Obstetrics & Gynaecology from January 2018 to June 2018. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Institutional ethical committee. All women attending the outpatient department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology who are currently breastfeeding their child or have had breastfed in the past were included in the study after written and informed consent. A questionnaire was filled by them which had questions regarding breastfeeding practices, attitude, beliefs and myths associated with it. Data was analysed and results tabulated.

RESULTS

One thousand women, who consented to participate in the study, were included. Of these thousand women, 569 were in age group 20

to 30yrs, 295 women were in 31 to 40 yrs and only 136 women were 41yrs of age or older. Majority of the women were educated (74%). 81% were homemakers and only 19% were working in jobs. Majority of the women (46%) belonged to lower socio-economic status followed by 44% belonging to lower middle class. Every woman in our study population had children. 26% women had one child and 73% had more than one child. It is a well-established fact that breastfeeding should be initiated within first hour of birth. On analysis of our data, we found that only 54% women in our study population had held their baby for the first time within 1st hr of birth and only 52% of these women breast fed their babies in this time (Figure 1). 15% breastfed their babies after 24 hours of birth. Prolactal feeds are known to cause septicaemia and are to be avoided, yet 43% women or their families in our study gave pre-lactal feeds to the newborn (Figure 1) in the form of honey or sugar solution. Approximately 27% women believed that cow or buffalo milk is equivalent to human milk and can be used as a substitute. 14% of these women believed that diluting the cow or buffalo milk with water makes it equivalent to human milk. 53% women breast fed their baby every two hours and 11% every 4 hours. 86% women burped the newborns after every feed, as is recommended, while 14% women in the study population considered burping only when the baby vomited or only in the day time when baby was awake. Few women considered burping as completely unnecessary. 17% women of the study population, breastfed their newborn for 6 months. 26% women breast fed their babies for up to 1 yr of age and majority (57.4%) continued breastfeeding even beyond 1yr of age (Figure 1). Majority of women (73.4%) started weaning at 6 months of age but 16.6% started weaning at the age of 1year and 10% started it as early as 1month age. 44% women gave babies water to drink before the age of 6 months. 21% women faced restriction while breast feeding on consumption of spicy food, cold water, rice, certain pulses etc and 11.7% had restrictions on visiting temples, attending weddings or death ceremonies. 11% women found these restrictions to be useful and necessary and would impose similar restrictions on future generations. 49% women wrongly believed that they would not conceive as long as they are breast feeding and

56.9% believed that mothers should not breast feed if suffering from fever. 45% women erroneously believed that breast feeding should be stopped if baby develops loose stools and 35.4% had a false notion that amount of milk secreted by a woman is directly proportional to the size of the breasts. 84% women were not aware that breast milk can be stored for later use. Majority (73.7%) of the women got their information about breast feeding from elders in the family and 77% said that they consult family members in case of any doubt. Only 18.3% got their information from doctors or health care workers. Many women felt that the information provided in mass media like television or radio was insufficient.

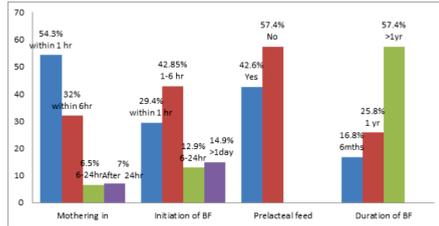


Figure 1-showing knowledge, attitude and practices towards breastfeeding

DISCUSSION:

The current study showed 29.4% women initiated breastfeeding their child within 1st hour of birth similar to that found by K Madhu et al⁴ where 44% of mothers initiated breastfeeding within 30 minutes of home delivery and 38% with Caesarean section. Syed E Mahmood et al⁵ too found 78.8% women who initiated breastfeeding within 24 hours of delivery. On the contrary Ravi Bhatia⁶ found that women practicing early feed (< 2 hours after birth) were just 4%. Breastfeeding should be initiated within 30 minutes of delivery, as it is important in developing the breast milk reflex and causes contraction of the uterus and prevents haemorrhage. Most common reason for delay in starting early feed in the index study was delay in shifting of women from labor room followed by family restrictions. Educating the health professionals about the need of initiating early breastfeeding by the mother and its importance in neonatal growth and development is of urgent concern. 42.6% women in the index study gave prelacteal feed to their child and the commonest prelacteal feed given was honey and sugar water similar to findings of K Madhu et al⁴ where 13% babies were fed with sugar water followed by honey (6%) and ghee(3%) Contrary to this Pooja J Mise et al⁷ found 88.4% mothers fed their children with colostrum and 75.9% lactating mothers did not believe in giving pre-lacteal feeds. Of those who gave, honey was the commonest. Colostrum is rich in vitamins, minerals and immunoglobulins that protects the child from infections. The malpractice of discarding the colostrum and giving pre-lacteal feed to the newborn is still prevalent, and mothers are unaware that it may be a source of contamination for the child. Giving pre-lacteal feed has been a deep rooted custom in India and thus educating people regarding benefits of colostrum could help deal with this issue. The index study showed that majority (57.4%) women continued breastfeeding even beyond 1 yr of age. 73.4% started weaning at 6 months of age in the present study whereas K madhu et al⁴ showed that only 40% were exclusively breastfeeding till 6 months whereas 53% women prematurely started weaning the child, in which insufficient milk formation was the main reason for supplementary feeding. This was also true for Poredi Vijayalakshmi et al. ⁸ Pooja J Mise et al⁷ in their study found that 64.3% women started weaning practices at 6 months and 24.1% at 1 year of age. Lactation failure and unsatisfactory growth of baby were the main reasons of early weaning in their study. The commonest complementary food used was infant formula followed by pulses water. The study concluded that wide spread lacunae still existed in knowledge of mothers regarding breast feeding and complementary feeding and thus it was necessary to convey right message about breastfeeding and weaning practices to them. An awareness needed to be generated regarding the importance of exclusive breast feeding, avoidance of pre-lacteal feeds and the benefits of timely and appropriate complementary feeding. The index study showed that only 18.3% women got their information on breastfeeding practices from a

doctor or health care worker and thus it becomes all the more necessary for the government to start organizing intervention programmes on breastfeeding practices during both antenatal and postnatal period of a woman so that correct practices are adopted and lead to better care of the newborn.

CONCLUSION

Health education regarding correct breastfeeding practices should be imparted to all pregnant females during their antenatal and postnatal check up. Educating the elderly female members of the family is also very important to bring about a change in the current child rearing practices.

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