



SOCIAL CUSTOMS AND BELIEFS DURING PREGNANCY AND IN POSTNATAL PERIOD

KEYWORDS

Taboos, beliefs, pregnancy, child birth

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ABSTRACT

Taboos and misconceptions during pregnancy have been part of Indian cultures since centuries. They can be harmful as well as beneficial. Because of these customs, in many parts of world, the pregnant females are forced to abstain from rich and healthy foods. Post partum maternal health care influences the health of both the mother and their children greatly. In some Asian societies, pregnant women are forbidden to sleep during the daytime as it is believed to result in difficult labour, retained placenta and neonatal jaundice. In some communities in India, the older women of the family determined each expectant mothers activity level and sleep habits.

INTRODUCTION

Taboos and misconceptions during pregnancy have been part of Indian cultures since centuries. They can be harmful as well as beneficial. Because of these customs, in many parts of world, the pregnant females are forced to abstain from rich and healthy foods. Post partum maternal health care influences the health of both the mother and their children greatly. Post-partum health beliefs and practices among the non-western culture are each distinct but have many similarities. These customs, local beliefs and family influences have to be given due importance in planning community health programmes.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Traditional pregnancy and childbirth beliefs and practices among women have received much attention in the past few decades. O Dempsey, 1988(1) provides detailed descriptions of traditional beliefs and practices among the people of Kenya. During pregnancy the woman must undergo a purification ceremony known as *parpara*, a collection to ensure a safe and easy birth. During this period, a husband ceases his hunting activities.

Taboos and misconceptions have been the custom of the people of India(2). Among the rural women of Surendranagar district, foods such as papaya, citrus foods and groundnut were avoided during pregnancy with the belief that such foods could cause abortion, placental disruption, difficult labour and many others(2). Papaya, mango, brinjal are considered to be hot food. Misconceptions regarding consumption of saffron results in fairer skin of the child was in 33.9% illiterate women.

A study in Australia(3) reported that the commonest herbs women used during pregnancy included raspberry leaf which is believed to strengthen tone of uterus.

In Ghana(4), majority of women used herbal medicines to treat malaria and abdominal pain, to induce smooth delivery, to keep baby healthy in uterus or to keep him kicking as well as to manage vaginal bleeding.

In some Asian societies(5), pregnant women are forbidden to sleep during the daytime as it is believed to result in difficult labour, retained placenta and neonatal jaundice.

In some communities in India(6), the older women of the family determined each expectant mothers activity level and sleep habits. Some women are told to increase their activity levels and some are

told to rest throughout pregnancy to save energy. Women received a henna tattoo after birth, which is meant to prevent depression and sickness and promote bonding between mother and baby. A ceremony is conducted on the 9th day postpartum to announce the name of the baby at the placental burial site. Additionally, the *Kuan Puja* ceremony is performed around the same time to signify the cleanliness of mother and baby. The women may follow the hot and cold balanced diet. Hot foods are those high in protein, sodium and acid while cold foods are those that are sweet or starchy.

In some communities in India(7), the place of delivery is decided by the woman's father or brother. At home births, the baby is sometimes not caught after being delivered and remains lying on the floor until the placenta is delivered.

In a study in Zambia(8), one-third of women believed eggs could cause a baby to be born without hair. About one in every three females under study believed that *Bhindi* during pregnancy could cause excessive salivation. About one in four respondents held the belief that using condoms during pregnancy could lead to a weak child. Two-thirds of the participants believed that herbs should be used to assist difficult delivery.

A study(9) in Telangana reported various beliefs and customs. Most of the general customs like celebrating *Seemantham*, preference of the place of delivery, travel dates, avoiding viewing eclipse are observed by most of the women. Usually women prefer parents home for the first delivery. For the fear of abortion, mothers prefer to travel only after 7th or 9th month. All pregnant women stay indoors during eclipses for the fear of ultra-violet irradiation causing congenital defects in the children. Wearing the waist belt is very common custom. The reason appears to avoid distended pot belly development after delivery. Ear plugging is a very common rural custom of covering the ears with a soft cloth or plugging the ears with cotton wool to prevent earaches. All pregnant women consume less water during and after pregnancy. Fish is avoided by rural women for the fear of causing pruritis. A special food item called *Kayam* which is made of jaggery, asafetida and cloves will be eaten daily for 3 days postnatally by most of the rural women to get the uterus involuted quickly. All the women will be given head bath on 11th day as the vaginal discharges stop by that day. Till then, they will take sponge bath only. Colostrum is discarded by rural women.

A study in Nepal(10) found that 56% of all Nepalese births are assisted only by relatives and friends. However, they are likely untrained and will use unsafe delivery practices like cutting the cord with unclean

razor blades or tying them dirty ties and smearing cow dung or ash onto the cord.

Nepali mothers are often secluded with their babies(11) right after the delivery because they are considered polluted. This is called *Sutkeri* period and lasts 3-11 days. During this period, the mother and child are considered vulnerable to evil spirits and diseases.

In a study(12),the relatively late registration of many women coincides with strong belief that one should not let one's pregnancy be known publically.

A study among Iranian women(13) revealed their fear about sexual activity during pregnancy because of the possibility of causing rupture of the hymen of the female fetus or possible fetal blindness.

CONCLUSION

Health education among the women especially the elderly women can improve the knowledge. Awareness programme should be conducted in such a way that the feelings of the people should not be hurt.

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