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MYTHS AND PERCEPTIONS ABOUT BREAST FEEDING PRACTICES AMONG HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS' FAMILY AND RELATIVES.

General Medicine

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ABSTRACT

Infants physical and mental development has been strongly linked to exclusive breast feeding since ages. Breast feeding is a norm in various societies until the age of 2 years and beyond .However social barriers exist for working as well as non-working moms who have to avoid breast feeding at some point This study was aimed to understand various beliefs about colostrum and breast feeding practices among non-medical relatives, families and friends of healthcare that prevent them from adopting such a healthy practice .A web-based survey was used to collect data. Total 378 surveys were received. 93% believed in giving a pre-lacteal to the kids soon after birth. Only 55% of people had given breast milk on the very first day of the child's birth and 50% of them were able to continue exclusive breast feeding for the first 6 months of life.32% of the parents fed their babies exclusively on artificial feed

KEYWORDS

Breast feeding, breast milk, Myths about feeding practices, pre-lacteals, Exclusive breast feeding.

INTRODUCTION:

Infants physical and mental development has been strongly linked to exclusive breast feeding since ages. Medical research has proven it with facts and figures that show the efficacy of breast feeding in the early years of life .Breast feeding is beneficial for the infants in promoting their growth ,protecting them from allergies, improving immunity against viruses and bacteria and improving brain development[1].

Breast feeding is a norm in various societies until the age of 2 years and beyond .However social barriers exist for working as well as non-working moms who have to avoid breast feeding at some point .The reasons can be social ,work environment and cultural values.[2]. Even though its cheap and available on demand, kids are not exclusively breast fed due to various beliefs and myths prevailing in the society especially in developing and resource poor countries [3].

The myths and beliefs about breast milk have been associated with centuries old customs and stories. Infants are deprived of their basic right to natural milk and are being fed on artificial formula or diluted animal source milk. These practices lead to spread of viral illnesses causing diarrhoea, respiratory tract illnesses, allergies, eczema, anaemia malnutrition and various vitamin and mineral deficiencies in developing world. Lack of resources for mass education in developing world, a low-level hygiene and socio-economic factors worsen the situation to a great extent [4].

Avoidance of breast feeding is associated with various effects on maternal health including lack of attachment and increased risk for breast cancer [5]. Although research literature shows extensive studies on the beneficial effects of breast milk on mothers and child's health. It is found that very limited qualitative studies are available on the knowledge, attitude, myths and beliefs about breast milk among general public.

This study was aimed to understand various beliefs about colostrum and breast feeding practices among non-medical relatives, families and friends of healthcare that prevent them from adopting such a healthy practice .We aimed to understand the influence of cultural beliefs and the perception about uses and side effects of breast feeding on mother and baby.

Through understanding the facts prevailing in general public, various education campaigns can be arranged to help people adopt this healthy practice and reduce the negative beliefs associated with breast milk and breast feeding. This can help us in creating awareness and raising healthy kids especially in developing and resource poor countries where artificial formulas add to the cost of living and indirectly increasing the cost of health.

OBJECTIVES:

1. To determine various myths and beliefs about breast feeding practices in the society
2. To determine the factors acting as barriers to breast feeding practices

Definitions

Colostrum: First form of milk produced after giving birth to the baby. It is rich in antibodies.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study design was based on a qualitative research method. It was a web-based survey that was sent to the medical professionals and a snowball technique was used. The medical professionals were requested to record the beliefs and opinions about breast feeding practices among their non-medical relatives, family members and friends. Those who were educated and capable of filling out the questionnaire recorded their responses individually while those people having difficulty in filling out the questionnaire, completed with help of community physicians who received the questionnaire from authors through e mails.

Survey included questions on the demographics, education and socioeconomic status, area and ethnicity. It included questions on the importance, advantages and disadvantages of breast feeding along with their beliefs and myths regarding feeding practices after a child's birth. The belief about colostrum and barriers to breast feeding were also included.

Th study was carried out from august2019 to October 2019 after taking

approval from the ethical committee of the health care organization. All participants were informed about their voluntary participation, anonymity and confidentiality. Written informed consent was taken from all participants. Data analysis was done using SPSS 21 software. Qualitative and quantitative data was analysed using frequency distribution, ANOVA and chi-square tests were applied. P value < 0.05 was taken as significant.

Inclusion Criteria:
Survey was sent to medical professionals working in various specialities and they were advised to record the views of their close and extended family members and friends who are not from a medical profession .Married couples with kids below the age of 5 years were included in the study .

Exclusion Criteria:
Unmarried family members, relatives and friends of health professionals were not included in data collection

RESULTS:
Total 378 surveys were received.10 surveys were not included in the data analysis because of incomplete information.

47 % surveys were filled by males and 53% by females. The demographics showed that the mean age was around 34.7 years. Majority of people were from the middle-class groups and 78% were educated including 37% having master's degree ,43% having bachelor and rest were educated until tenth standard or below.22% of surveys were recorded from people who never went to school. All men were working and earning and out of females ,63% were working ladies. 54% percent of people were from towns and villages (table 1).

Family demographics showed that 51% had 2 kids. 40 % had 3 and rest of the people had 4 or more kids. 38% had a nuclear family system while rest of them were living with their families, parents or siblings. 13% had a live-in maid or nanny for kids.

Specific questions related to breast feeding colostrum, pre-lacteals, and parents' knowledge about breast feeding showed that 93% believed in giving a pre-lacteal to the kids soon after birth. Only 55% of people had given breast milk on the very first day of the child's birth and only 23% gave breast milk in the first hour after birth.

78% believed that it is a religious obligation to give an pre-lacteal and a ritual as well while rest of them believed that it has a cultural basis only and it is a practice running in families so it is must to give pre-lacteal to babies.

It was considered a norm by 73% to not have enough milk on first few days and to give an alternate to breast milk like glucose, simple water or artificial formula milk during the first two to three days of life. 70% tried to breast feed the baby in the first three days and out of those 68% were successful in establishing the breast feeding however only 50% of them were able to continue exclusive breast feeding for the fist 6 months of life. Rest of them gave breast milk along with top feeding including formula milk and cow's milk. 32% of the parents fed their babies exclusively on artificial feed (Figure 2).

It is a surprising fact that out of those feeding artificial formula to their babies, majority of them included people with low socio economic status and never went to school accounting for about 68% of parents feeding artificial feed to babies in the first 6 months of life.

70 % of parent believe that colostrum is heavy for kids and they cannot digest it properly so an alternative milk should be given .The common choice was goats milk as cows or buffalos milk is considered heavy for the baby gut and they cannot digest it. 84% believed that mothers diet has an effect on the breast milk and what ever she eats is excreted In milk causing indigestion .98% believed that gas in stomach or colic is due to the food mother takes during breast feeding.

33% believed in having a test of breast milk in the laboratory due its thick consistency in the beginning and its harmful for the baby. 63% did not find breast feeding useful for the mother while rest of them believed that its healthy for mother but no specific benefit s quoted except 8% of respondents who believed that its useful in losing weight after childbirth.

88% believed that breast milk is beneficial for baby but only 64% were able to quote any specific advantages like improving the immunity and growth of baby .Rest of them could not report any specific benefit of breast milk for the baby except the acknowledgement that its healthy for the baby.

Questions on the desired duration and frequency of breast feeding varied among the participants. All Muslims gave reference of the of two years that is mentioned in Quran. Christians and Hindus also believed that the minimum duration should be 6 months to one year. The minimum reported duration was 4 months by 11% of the participants and maximum was 2 years reported by 65% of the participants.

They believed in the local cultural values that all the females should have some heavy mixtures of nuts, sugar, ghee and flour after the delivery until 40 days post-partum.

Regarding the barriers to breast feeding and conditions where parents avoid breast feeding ,45% reported that the biggest barrier was reduced milk production in the first few days .Rest of participants reported cracked nipples (18%), maternal weakness (11%), working moms (25%), cultural values and non-scientific reasons that were taught to them by ancestors that breast milk is thin and low in calories and baby need formula feed for better weight gain (46%), maternal serious illness (27%) and poor weight gain in the baby was reported by 48% of the participants .

Special conditions in baby where parents avoided breast feeding included diarrhoea reported by 44%, nasal congestion and upper respiratory tract infection reported by 33% of parents.

Table 1: Demographics of the participants

Sr.#	Variables	Percentage %
1	Males	47%
2	Females	53%
3	Education: 1. Masters 2. Bachelor's 3. Never went to school	37% 43% 22%
4	Working men	100%
5	Working ladies	63%
6	Residing in cities	46%
7	Residing in villages and towns	54%
8	Joint family system	62%
9	Nuclear family system	38%

Figure 1: Barriers To Breast Feeding

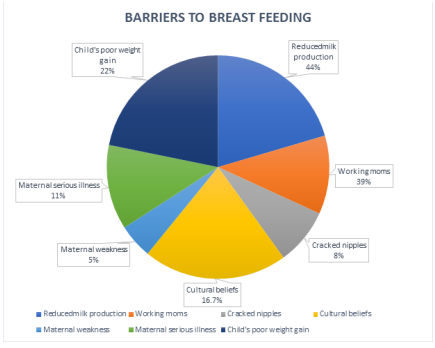
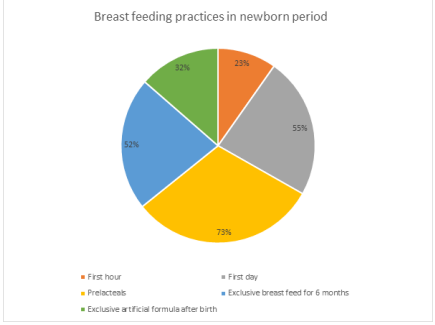


Figure 2: Breast Feeding Practices In New Born Period



DISCUSSION:

Feeding practices in the first 2 years of life greatly affect the mental and physical development of the children and breast milk save them from malnutrition and improve their immunity. According to an estimate by WHO, deaths due to pneumonia and diarrhoea account for 53% and 555 in the first year of life and poor breast-feeding practices have resulted in 1.4 million deaths in children below 5 years [6].

In our study we found that 93% people believed that pre-lacteals are important as a first feed .A similar study in Nepal [7] shows that 30% of mothers believed in pre-lacteals while a study in Nigeria reported 82% people gave pre-lacteals [8].

Our study shows that 55% of people started breast feeding in the first day of life with only 23 % in the first hour of life while a study in Ethiopia showed that 78.8% of mothers started feeding on time [9]. A similar research study in Cyprus sowed that 84% started feeding in first 48 hours of life [10].

It was found that only 50% were able to continue exclusive breast feeding in the first 6 months of life however they believed strongly that a child must be fed breast milk in first two years of life. While a similar study showed that exclusive breast feeding was practiced in China, Malaysia and India in 11%,2% and 5% of mother respectively in these countries [11].

An interesting prevailing belief was that colostrum is heavy for the baby and difficult to digest therefore alternative milk like goats milk was preferred by majority.33% also believed that colostrum is not good for health and they believe in having a lab test of such milk to check its safety for the baby. A study showed that 63% mothers fed colostrum to the babies [12].

Regarding the barriers to breast feeding and conditions where parents avoid breast feeding ,45% reported that the biggest barrier was reduced milk production in the first few days .Rest of participants reported cracked nipples (18%), maternal weakness (11%), working moms (25%), cultural values and non-scientific reasons that were taught to them by ancestors that breast milk is thin and low in calories and baby need formula feed for better weight gain (46%), maternal serious illness (27%) and child poor weight gain in the baby was reported by 48% of the participants .Study done in America shows that the barriers were privacy and physical problems associated with caesarean section, an altered body image and lack of milk contributed as a barrier [13] while a study in Indonesia showed that lack of education ,perceived uses and advertisements of formula feed led to reduced breast feeding practices [14].

We conducted this study to see the beliefs and myths about breast milk and feeding practices among relatives of healthcare professionals. The results show that they have similar beliefs as general public, and they do indulge in non-scientific practices. This signifies the importance of health and public education. The healthcare professionals can easily educate and spread awareness among their relatives, friends and families. This can serve a s a first step towards educating a society. This also describes a fact that health professionals have not fully succeeded in imparting knowledge and improve the belief system of people living around them.

Our study has limitations as it was a cross sectional survey using snowball technique and data is from multiple sources including various nationalities, so we cannot generalise these findings to a single nation or ethnicity. It however signifies the importance educating families of health professionals as a first step towards educating the society.

CONCLUSIONS:

Breast milk is the healthiest form of nutrition in infancy. It is a fact that many myths and non-scientific beliefs prevail in the society especially in the developing countries. Lack of [proper nutrition affects the baby and it is a leading cause of malnutrition and deaths in infancy in the developing world .The results of this study have revealed the importance of health education by the healthcare professionals that can make a difference In improving the myths and beliefs about breast feeding and other health issues prevailing in the society .

It is therefore recommended that public education should be improved at government level as well as at individual level to improve the health of infants and reduce morbidity and mortality.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest

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