

Knowledge, Awareness and Perceptions towards Breastfeeding practices among antenatal and postnatal mothers in India

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Abstract

Breastfeeding the baby is the most important practice that promotes optimal growth and development of the infant. World Health Organization has recommended exclusive Breastfeeding for the first six months. Breastfeeding not only promotes Infant health and wellbeing but also protects the mother from developing illnesses. There is a compelling need to understand the level of awareness, perceptions and attitude towards breastfeeding and also develop programs to ensure that the knowledge is translated to practice in the postnatal phase. This review highlights the level of knowledge, attitude and perceptions towards breastfeeding, factors influencing the breastfeeding practices, Breastfeeding and its relation to Mental health of new mothers and the various initiatives launched by the Government to promote awareness on breastfeeding.

Keywords: breastfeeding practices, antenatal mothers, postnatal mothers, pre-lacteal feeds.

INTRODUCTION

Breastmilk is the best gift that a mom can gift her baby. It is also called as liquid gold and acts as a strong shield of protection for the baby against infections. The World Health Organization has put forth three major recommendations to reduce infant mortality rate : a)Initiation of breastmilk within the first one hour of birthing b)Exclusive Breastfeeding for the first six months c)ensuring proper complimentary feeding from six months.(1,2)Breastfeeding not only protects the baby but also the mother from developing illnesses like breast cancer, ovarian cancer and also reduces the risk of postpartum haemorrhage and osteoporosis.(3)However the challenges that a mother encounters in her breastfeeding journey are not widely addressed. Problems with incorrect latching of the infant, breast engorgement and soreness, mother's perception of secreting less milk and her confidence about breastfeeding are few of the many struggles that a lactating mother goes through. To help the mother combat these challenges it is of paramount importance to empower the mother with the required knowledge and skills on breastfeeding practices and benefits that can help the mother sail through the journey of breastfeeding with confidence and at ease.

Factors influencing Knowledge, Attitude and Perception towards Breastfeeding Practices

There are various factors associated with the awareness, knowledge and perception towards breastfeeding are pressures from the family, educational background, traditional beliefs, socio-cultural, age of the mother, family income, income, type and place of delivery, the challenges faced by the mother at the time of nursing, the support that she gets from her family and the guidance from the hospital. (4,5)

The joint family system has been both an encouraging as well as a discouraging factor in promoting breastfeeding, (6) Some mothers may have the inhibition to voice their issues related to breastfeeding loudly to their family members. (7,8,9) In unit families, women are finding it much easier to express their challenges to their spouses and address the difficulties faced and find a solution. (6)

Awareness on Breastfeeding practices among Antenatal and Postnatal Mothers across India

Studies from various parts of India have revealed that there is a considerable level of awareness regarding breastfeeding practices and its benefits. From the studies performed in Odisha, Mangalore, Jammu and Kerala to understand the awareness of breastfeeding among antenatal mothers, it is observed that 64%, 47.9%, 33%, 42.7% and 70% mothers of the mother's want to exclusively breastfeed their children respectively. It is significant to note that in a study performed in Kerala 15.3% of the mothers considered diluted house milk as a substitute for press milk and 12.96% of the mothers considered undiluted as a substitute for breast milk. In a study performed in Jammu, it is observed that a high percentage of 82.5% antenatal mothers considered cow's milk as a substitute. (20,21,22)

From the studies that were exclusively conducted for postnatal mothers performed across states like Karnataka, Uttarakhand Jammu and Tamil Nadu show a high level of mothers who breastfeed their children. However, level of exclusive breastfeeding has been relatively low in the studies performed in the states of Karnataka [36.9 %], Uttarakhand [51.3%] Jammu [42.7%] and Banaras [45%]. (20,23,24,25)

Perception and Practices about Pre-lacteal Feeds among Antenatal Mothers

Pre-lacteal feeds are introduced to the baby even before the initiation of breastmilk. Examples of pre-lacteal feeds given to babies as per the cultural context are sugar water, honey, cow/ buffalo milk and castor oil. (10) The main reasons for giving pre-lacteal feeds to children can be due to the inadequacy of milk, priming by relatives that milk secretion will commence only by the third after delivery. (5) Giving pre-lacteal feeds has been a very common cultural practice in India and many developing countries and has also been one of the main causes for delay in the initiation of breastfeeding. In a study performed by Ramachandra PM et al in 90% of the mothers were against giving pre-lacteal feeds to the babies. In contrast to this finding, a study in Kerala revealed that only 59.6% of the mothers only were aware that pre-lacteal feeds should not be given to babies.

Awareness of Breastfeeding and its impact on the Mental health of New Mothers

There are multiple factors that determine the relation between Breastfeeding and the depressive symptoms in new mothers. Some of the main determinants are the Challenges that the mothers face while breastfeeding, lack of awareness and guidance to address the challenges, low levels of confidence and self-esteem, irrational and negative thoughts and emotions and the failure to establish a secure attachment with the infant. Owing to the psychological disturbances that a mother goes through the vulnerable period of transition to the postnatal phase, mothers are less likely to observe and identify infant behaviour and cues which leads to further challenges in breastfeeding. (11,12) It is also very important to build awareness among antenatal and postnatal mothers that that Breastfeeding ameliorates the secretion of Oxytocin and Prolactin which are responsible for lactation. The hormone Oxytocin helps promote a sense of nurturing, sense of love, improved sleep and relaxation during breastfeeding. Also, it is suggested that lactation accentuates the stress response leading to a reduction in the cortisol hormone levels. (13,14,15,16)

Initiatives by the Government to promote awareness about breastfeeding related practices

Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative

The baby friendly hospital initiative was launched by UNICEF and who to encourage and promote breastfeeding. The BFHI was launched in India in the year 1993. The initiative has developed 10 steps to successful breastfeeding emphasising optimal care for new mothers and infants. The initiative focuses on the key aspects of empowering the mother with the knowledge skills and competencies related to breastfeeding. The initiative also insists that the importance of breastfeeding and the challenges needs to be discussed with the family members.

MAA (Mothers' Absolute Affection) - is a national breastfeeding promotion program to ensure and promote optimal breastfeeding practices and provide counselling support thru healthcare system. The key components off the program is improving the availability of skilled personnel to provide counselling services, community engagement, enhancing communication about breastfeeding through mass media.

IAP Health Phone Initiative - is a unique program designed to educate and empower pregnant and lactating mothers about nutrition, healthcare and breastfeeding. The program leverage is the increasing use of mobile phones and aids to reach out to more than 6,000,000 girls and women across the age 13 and 35 and also their families. The program has launched 4 educational

videos dad can be viewed on the mobile phones the videos are based on the topics related to nutrition, healthcare, and breastfeeding.

Recommendations for future research

From the studies conducted so far across different states, it is evident that antenatal mothers need to be empowered with knowledge and skills about Breastfeeding, its importance, benefits, challenges and remedies during the antenatal phase. The purpose of educating mothers is actualised only when the knowledge and skills learnt in the antenatal phase are translated to practice in the postnatal phase. It is recommended that mothers need more guidance and support in implementing the learning and thereby the mother becomes more confident in their breastfeeding journey. The implementation can be made more successful by appointing lactation counsellors, trained nurses who can reach out to postnatal mothers on a weekly or bi-weekly basis. Experts can also conduct Q&A sessions related breastfeeding through online sessions, have one to one phone calls to clarify their doubts since accessing the hospitals can be a challenge to mothers during their postnatal phase.

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Conflicts of Interest

There are no conflicts of interest

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