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Title: Why do women stop breastfeeding in Palestine ?

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Abstract:

The study aims to explore the reasons why Palestinian mothers stop breastfeeding (BF) before six months of babyhood.

Methods: A cross-sectional study was conducted in Hebron, Palestine, that included 420 mothers of 420 live singleton newborns between January 1, 2022, and July 31, 2022, in the main hospital. Mothers who did not initiate breastfeeding or continued to breastfeed, either exclusively or with supplementation, beyond the first six months of life were excluded. When the women visited the clinic for a 6-month baby vaccination or a family planning consultation, public health doctors and midwives gathered information about BF status and the reasons for stopping BF during face-to-face interviews.

Results: Of the 420 mothers who participated, 300 stopped breastfeeding completely before their baby was six months old. Only 281 gave an obvious reason for stopping breastfeeding, such as low milk production, the child weaning himself, pain, or the mother's preference.

Conclusion: This study highlights the reasons why women stop breastfeeding completely before the baby is six months old. The results may help identify interventions for prolonging breastfeeding.

Keywords: breastfeeding, weaning, lactation, family medicine , Palestine.

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1. Introduction

Breast milk is important for both infants and mothers and has established health, psychological, and environmental benefits, which include improved cognitive development and lowering the risk of infections, cancers, and diabetes in children and mothers (1). It is considered to be optimal food to enhance the growth and development of infants (1, 2). Breastfeeding (BF) should be continued for at least 6 months, according to the Canadian Infant Feeding Joint Working Group (3,4,5). Despite that, many mothers choose to stop breastfeeding before 6 months of age for many reasons, such as insufficient milk supply, infant self-weaning, returning to studying, school, or work, and many other issues related to obstetrical and neonatal factors, infant age, lifestyle, mother's education, parity, level of income, stress factors, and smoking (6–9).

Since BF contributes to the good health of mothers and babies (10), the `World Health Organization (WHO) and international bodies like the United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) developed guidelines that recommend supporting mothers to breastfeed their babies for the first 6 months of age (11, 12). Unfortunately, UNICEF data shows a decrease in the BF rate from 89% in the second month to 78% in the 6th month of age (13). According to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) of Arab countries, the challenges of BF were lack of education and policy support, inadequate training of mothers by health workers, marketing formula, returning to work, scanty milk production, sickness and diseases, and pregnancy (14). As a part of the global efforts to promote BF, Palestinian hospitals try to be baby-friendly that support and educate mothers about BF. In this study, we will explore the reasons Palestinian mothers stop breastfeeding.

Methods :

A cross-sectional study was conducted in Hebron, Palestine, that included mothers of all live singleton newborns in the period between January 1, 2022, and July 31, 2022. Mothers who did not initiate breastfeeding or who continued to breastfeed, either exclusively or with supplementation beyond the first six months of life, were excluded. Information about BF status at 6 months of age and reasons for stopping BF was collected from all women enrolled in the study by public health doctors and midwives during face-to-face interviews when women visited clinics for baby vaccination and family planning consultation. Written consent was obtained from all the participants. Interview questions were xxx. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics.

Results :

all women had initiated breastfeeding before hospital discharge. But, before their baby was six months of age, 300 stopped breastfeeding completely. Most (281) gave an obvious reason for stopping, such as low milk production, the child weaning him/herself, pain or, the mother's preference. See Table 1. The mean age of mothers was 31 years, a majority had at least a bachelor's degree (60.7%), and the family income average was (2000) shekel, approximately 650 dollars

Table(1): Palestinian mothers' most common reasons for stopping breastfeeding before their baby was 6 months of age. N= 281

Reason	(%)
Inadequate milk production	28%
Child self-weaning	30%
Returning to work	24.8%
Fatigue, diseases and painful nipples	18%
Medical advice of formula	15%
Mother preference	8%

Discussion :

Mothers in the study cited many factors associated with stopping breastfeeding before 6 months of babyhood, such as decreased milk production, lack of training, and short maternity leave time. These were also discussed in the Behzadifar's systemic review (15). Insufficient milk production may result from the mother's limited knowledge about lactation, where crying is seen as the main sign of hunger and giving milk formula is perceived to be the best solution (16). Palestinian women cited "fatigue with breastfeeding" as a reason for cessation (18%) which was similar to a Canadian study, where (18.9%) gave the same rationale (17). Pain was also a major challenge, as demonstrated by Ghanaian mothers (18). Effective early training on the best lactation methods helps to increase milk production and decrease pain and is crucial factor to avoid early and perhaps unnecessary baby weaning (19).

Some babies in the study refused breast milk and weaned themselves. A systematic review by Zimmerman and colleagues, had similar findings (20). In addition, a secondary data analysis at Michigan State University highlighted that younger and less educated mothers and those who lacked of support were factors in stopping breast feeding (21). Moreover, a cross-sectional survey done in Canada revealed that a strong mother's intention for short-duration breastfeeding played a role (22).

Breast milk is still the ideal food for infants (23) Although the literature indicates that milk formula supplementation is negatively associated with breastfeeding duration, it is not obvious which occurs first, whether breastfeeding problems lead to milk formula usage or whether supplementation of milk formula occurs first, leading to breastfeeding problems (24).

Conclusion and Recommendations: Due to the many benefits of breast feeding for the infant, it is recommended that all Palestinian mothers be trained about breast feeding. The health care provider should be educated to improve mothers' confidence in their ability to breastfeed. Is there a role for nurses in the breast feeding education and support? and enhance their knowledge of the importance of lactation before 6 months of babyhood. Secondly, policymakers in ministry of health , should also implement guidelines in hospitals and clinics to overcome the challenges and barriers of exclusively breastfeeding until 6 months of babyhood, in addition to prolonged maternity leave

Declarations

Ethics, approval, and consent to participate

All procedures performed in this study have been performed following the Declaration of Helsinki. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Palestine Polytechnic University. All subjects involved in the study were invited to participate voluntarily and signed informed consent. All participants were interviewed in a private clinic, where they were informed that their information would be used solely for research purposes and that their confidentiality would be guaranteed.

Availability of data and materials

All data generated or analyzed during this study are included in this published article

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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Author Contribution

Neveen Shalalfa designed and conducted the study. Neveen Shalalfa , Baraa, and Shatha provided materials and collected the data. Ibrahem al-Heeh analyzed the data. Neveen Shalalfa and Ibrahem al-Heeh wrote and drafted the manuscript. All authors reviewed the manuscript.

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