Breastfeeding: Knowledge and attitude of college girls

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To assess knowledge and attitude of college girls in Dammam area towards breastfeeding.

Methods: A cross-sectional study with a random sample of 362 female students in the Girl’s college in Dammam, Saudi Arabia, using a self-administered questionnaire.

Results: The ages of the students ranged from 18 to 29 years. About 57% of them received some health education about breastfeeding. One quarter reported that they learned about breastfeeding at school. About 4% of students learned from their mothers. Less than half the students in the sample (40%) knew the meaning of colostrum. Only 38% of the students gave the right answer about the right time for the first feed. Regarding the frequency of breastfeeding, one third gave the right answer.

Conclusion: The study showed considerable deficiency in the knowledge of the college female students about breastfeeding. Relevant knowledge and skills about breastfeeding should be included in the curriculum of College to prepare them for successful breastfeeding.

Keywords: Breastfeeding, health education, knowledge, college students.


Breastfeeding is a cultural role for women in Middle Eastern societies. It was universally practiced until a few decades back when it started to decline. Promotion of breastfeeding is one of four priorities strategy proposed by UNICEF to safeguard the health of children.1 Breastfeeding is beneficial for both babies and mothers in rich and poor countries. Besides being ideal for babies, it helps to prevent sepsis in newborn babies. It protects gut, chest, ear and urinary tract from infections in young children, and is valuable in the management of diarrhoea.2,3

Although the advantages of breastfeeding are well documented, studies in the Saudi Arabia showed a decreasing incidence of breastfeeding along with diminishing length of the nursing period.4,5,6 In view of this, research is needed to find ways and means of reversing this trend. Primary health care physicians, more than others, should have concern for the current status of breastfeeding in Saudi Arabia.

Knowledge and attitudes of college female students constitute a priority in breastfeeding research as they will eventually become mothers. Studies have shown that the level of education of women can affect the intention and success of breastfeeding.7,8 Since college students qualify to become teachers, they can play an important role through their future careers. Besides, they can enlighten women in the community on the benefits and importance of breastfeeding.

The objective of this study was to assess knowledge and attitude of college girls towards breastfeeding and to use this as a basis for a strategy to promote appropriate knowledge, attitude and breastfeeding practices among themselves and the women in the community.

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Methods. This was a cross-sectional study. The study population included all female students in the girl's college in Dammam city, Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia. There was a total of 6250 students in the college; 3750 in Arts and 2500 in Science at the time of the study.

The study sample was calculated using a standard formula for estimating sample size. The calculated sample was 362 students. The students were stratified by tract (Arts and science). There were 4 levels in each specialty. The total sample size of 362 students was selected from all classes with probability proportional to size of the class.

A self-administered questionnaire was used as a tool for the study. The questionnaire was filled by all students simultaneously. It was designed to collect demographic, personal data, and important questions on breastfeeding such as; the right time for the first feed, frequency and duration of breastfeeding. Open ended questions on benefits of breastfeeding to the mother and baby were also included.

Data was analyzed by a personal computer using EPI-info version 5 statistical software and SPSS (statistical package for social sciences). Chi-square and t-test were used and a significance level of 0.05 was considered.

Results. A total of 285 students; responded giving a response rate of 78.7%. 163 of them (57%) were from Science and 120 (43%) were from Arts. The majority of them (66%) came originally from the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia. The ages of students ranged from 18 to 29 years. More than one third of the students (37%) were married; 6 of them (2%) were divorced and more than half (58%) were single. Nearly half the students' mothers (48%) were either illiterate or semi-literate. Fifty four of the mothers (19%) had primary education only. Five percent of the mothers had intermediate education, while about 8% of the mothers had secondary education. Fifty three of the mothers (19%) had university education and only one had a postgraduate degree.

One hundred and sixty one of the students (57%) said they had received some education about breastfeeding. About one quarter of the students reported that they learned about breastfeeding at school while almost one third learned about it outside school. When they were asked who gave the lesson on breastfeeding, only 3.9% said they learned from their mothers, about equal proportion (15.8%) from the teacher and media, and (17.9%) from other sources. Almost 112 (39.3%) of them did not receive any education on breastfeeding. Less than half the students in the sample (40%) knew the meaning of "colostrum". However the rest either gave a wrong or incomplete answer.

Regarding the right time for the first feed, 109 (38%) of the students gave the right answer. Half of the students said the baby should be put to the breast few hours after birth, and about 12% said the first feed should be given within days. Some thought it is not necessary when to start the first feed. When asked about how often should a mother breastfeed her baby, about one third, (96) of the students knew the right frequency of breast feeding, then they answered "on demand". However, the rest of the students gave different wrong answers, some said 'every hour' others said 'every three hours' and some said 'every six hours'.

When asked about how long should a feed last, about a third (34.7%) said it should last 10 minutes, about one fourth said it should last more than 15 minutes, about a fifth (20.7%) said it should last 15 minutes and 33 of the students (12%) said the feed should not last more than 5 minutes. Regarding how long should a baby be breastfed, 167 (58.6%) of the students said it should be more than a year, 59 (21%) said the duration of breastfeeding should be 12 months. However, 22 (8%) said they don't know and another 36 (13%) said it should be 9 months or less.

Table 1 - Benefits of breastfeeding to the baby and mother according to students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefits to baby</th>
<th>No. (%)</th>
<th>Benefits to mother</th>
<th>No (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gives baby immunity against disease</td>
<td>162 (45)</td>
<td>Restores womb to normal position</td>
<td>82 (23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gives child Psychological satisfaction</td>
<td>94 (26)</td>
<td>Creates strong bond to the baby</td>
<td>73 (20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideal nutrition</td>
<td>81 (22)</td>
<td>Improves figure of mother</td>
<td>63 (17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enables infant to grow healthy</td>
<td>77 (21)</td>
<td>Prevents cancer of breast and uterus</td>
<td>59 (16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enables to recognize and love his/her mother</td>
<td>30 (8)</td>
<td>A natural contraceptive</td>
<td>40 (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protect babies from diarrhea and enteric deseases</td>
<td>23 (6)</td>
<td>Protect mother from diseases</td>
<td>25 (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increases the level of intelligence</td>
<td>20 (6)</td>
<td>Makes mother happy</td>
<td>19 (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rids mother of milk in the breast</td>
<td>16 (4)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2 - Duration of a breastfed by age of respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age distribution (in years)</th>
<th>Wrong No.</th>
<th>Right No.</th>
<th>Total No.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;20</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-24</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;25</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>240</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

the students about the benefits of breastfeeding to the baby and mother. One hundred and sixty two of the students (45%) thought that breastfeeding gives baby immunity against some diseases. Regarding the benefits of breastfeeding to mother, 82 of the students (23%) thought that breastfeeding restores womb to normal position, and this represents the highest response about benefits of breastfeeding to mother.

Table 2 shows the relationship between the knowledge about duration of each feed and distribution. Significantly more younger students (less than 20 years) knew the correct answer to the question about duration of each feed compared to other age group. (P < 0.05).

Discussion. For any breastfeeding program to succeed, it is important to improve the knowledge and attitude of mothers about it. In this study, 57% of college students seem to have received some education about breast feeding. This percentage is small especially if we realize that more than one third of them were married. The realization of this deficiency is expected to influence attitudes and also practices of these young women. The effect of deficient education should be evaluated with changes in lifestyle in mind with more urbanization and more dismantling of extended families, the need for educating young inexperienced women become essential. The school seems to have a limited role in education about breastfeeding as only one quarter of them had some teaching on it. Several studies encourage teaching about breastfeeding to school girls to influence their decision on breastfeeding.13,16 A small proportion of students learned about breastfeeding from their mothers. In this study, the role of mother as a source of health education about breastfeeding is much less than expected. It is surprising that such a small percentage of students received instructions from their mothers but the percentage might be expected to be a little higher if the population studied were all young mothers rather than students. Also this could be explained by the high proportion of educated mothers, change in lifestyle and urbanization. Several studies have shown strong association between educational level attained and the incidence and duration of breastfeeding.11 A woman's education affects her motivation to breastfeed. In many industrialized countries in the west, breastfeeding nowadays is becoming more common among educated and upper-class women. On the other hand, in third world countries the educated women are more likely to feed their infants artificially. However, in some countries, women's education apparently has no effect either way.12 Al-Frayh et al found in their study in Saudi Arabia, that the higher the educational level of the mother, the less likely she would breastfeed her infant.4 If mother's do not practice breastfeeding, this will be reflected in the attitudes and knowledge of their children about breastfeeding. In Saudi Arabia, at present, there is education to the public about nutrition through schools and television and this is expected to have an effect on public awareness.

Less than half the students in the sample knew the meaning of colostrum. This represents a deficiency in the knowledge of the students about mother's milk and its protective value. Knowledge about colostrum is particularly important, not only because of its protective value but also because of the prevalent misperceptions about it. When asked about the right time for the first feed, only (38%) of the students gave the right answer. This is a vital information that they would need shortly. This means that married students probably did not give the first feed in time. Also we do not know if these students had seen their own mothers breast feed immediately after delivery. The time of the first feed is crucial to successful breastfeeding. More effort is to be put in awakening the awareness of potential mothers to it. The Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative which is now largely adopted in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is expected to improve the situation since most deliveries take place in hospitals. Several studies encourages immediate postpartum suckling.13,14,15 Early suckling helps milk production to start sooner and encourages the important psychological bonding of the mother and her new born through a close, warm contact. It has also been found that mothers who initiate breastfeeding early will breastfeed longer than those who start after 12 hours later.13 Studies in three Arab Gulf states showed that the proportion of mothers who started breast feeding at the first hour after delivery were 11.5%, 28% and 37% in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Oman, respectively. One of the reasons of late initiation of breastfeeding in the Gulf countries is a misconception that colostrum is bad for the infant. This belief is still widespread in some Gulf countries.15 It is well documented that colostrum is beneficial to the infant both nutritionally and immuno-logically.10,12,13

The poor responses on the frequency of feeding
warrant a special attention. Most of recent studies recommend "on demand" feeding whereby infants should be given the breast whenever they cry of hunger.2,10,12,13,14 Musaiger has found that many mothers in the Gulf believe that infants should be breastfed according to a schedule, and therefore limit the number of feedings per day and night. This practice seems to be affected by the mother's educational level and employment.15 The students were also asked about the duration of each feed and more than one third answered correctly. Several studies have shown that the average time of a feed is about 5-10 minutes.10,12,13 About 60% thought that breastfeeding should last more than a year while one fifth thought it should be up to one year. Those who did not know the answer to this question were few; only 8%. Apparently, they did not know the right answer or they did not want to commit themselves. In this culture it was the norm for women to breastfeed for 2 years. A duration of 2 years is recommended by religious teaching. In this study the respondents were not clear about breastfeeding duration. This could be explained by deficiency in their knowledge or may reflect observation of their mothers or other close female relatives. This needs to be attended to through a number of possible measures such as: health education. The tradition in most parts of the developing world is to breastfeed for at least 12 months, but it is recommended to continue breastfeeding up to 2 years of age.10,12,13 Musaiger reported that the duration of breastfeeding has declined steeply in the Gulf region.13 Al-Frayh et al in their study in Riyadh in 1988 found that the average duration of breast feeding for infants in Saudi Arabia was 5.05 months.4

The knowledge of the students about the benefits of breastfeeding to mother and to the baby was satisfactory. This could be explained by the fact that most of health education programs about breastfeeding concentrate on this aspect. The study shows that students who were less than 20 years of age knew more about breast feeding than students 20 years or above. Mass media and school nowadays play a role on health education about breastfeeding.

There was a statistically significant difference between Science and Arts students in some misperceptions about breastfeeding. This was reported elsewhere-not being a direct objective of this study. However, there seems to be no significant difference between the students in the 2 tracks in relation to knowledge and attitude towards breastfeeding.

In conclusion, the study shows a serious deficiency in the knowledge of the college girls about breastfeeding. Mothers play a minimal role on health education about this topic. It is recommended that relevant knowledge and skills about breastfeeding be integrated in the curriculum of Saudi health professionals at all levels. The training and education of health professionals is of the utmost importance as they play a key role in the education of the public in general and mothers in particular. Mothers should have a positive role on the education of their daughters about breastfeeding. This can be effected through educating them in school about breastfeeding. Child rearing practice with the emphasis on breastfeeding should be included in the curriculum of health education for secondary schools and colleges. Instructions in schools should be one part of a three pronged instructional strategy based in Primary Care, well Baby Clinics and in Antenatal clinics. A comparative study involving the knowledge of women in our Antenatal Clinics would be of interest.

References