



Knowledge and Attitudes of Female University Students in Sharjah about Breast Feeding

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Abstract

Objectives:

To assess the Knowledge and attitude of female university students in Sharjah about breast feeding.

Research Design and methods:

A cross sectional study was carried out on a sample of 196 female students who were in Sharjah university hostel during the summer course 2002. A self administered questionnaire was answered by the students to assess their knowledge about important aspects of breast feeding and to know whether they are willing to breast feed in the future.

Results:

Among the 196 students, 79.9% were UAE nationals and 20.1% were non-UAE nationals. The questionnaire contained ten questions assessing the knowledge of the students about the meaning of exclusive breast feeding, the meaning of partial breast feeding, weaning, colostrums, what colostrums is good for, best time to start weaning feeds, best time to start breast feeding, frequency of breast feeding, the duration of each feed and the duration of exclusive breast feeding. Correct answers were given by 8.2%, 57.7%, 3.6%, 39.3%, 51.0%, 20.9%, 49.0%, 46.9%, and 6.6% respectively.

95.4% of the students are willing to breast feed in the future.

There was a statistically significant correlation between being breast fed as an infant and willing to breast feed in the future (p value of 0.004). Of the group which was not breast fed 81.0% students were willing to breast feed in the future. On the other hand, in the breast fed group 98.2% were willing to breast feed.

A significant correlation was found between having previous educational programs on breast feeding and knowing the meaning of colostrums (50.5% vs. 29.6%).

Conclusion:

The study showed that female university students in Sharjah were willing to breast feed in future. However their knowledge about breastfeeding needs to be increased by future educational programs.

Introduction

There has been significant reliable evidence produced over recent years to show that breast feeding had diverse and compelling advantages to infants, mothers, families and societies (1, 3).

Epidemiological studies in the United States, Canada, Europe, and other developed countries showed that breast feeding decreases the incidence and / or severity of diarrhea, lower respiratory tract infections, otitis media, bacteremia, bacterial meningitis, botulism, urinary tract infections, and necrotizing enterocolitis. Moreover, additional studies show that breast feeding has possible protective effect against sudden infant death syndrome, insulin dependant diabetes mellitus, Chron's disease, ulcerative colitis, lymphoma, allergic diseases, and other chronic digestive diseases. In addition, breast feeding may lead to possible enhancement of cognitive development (1, 2, and 3).

Breast feeding has possible health benefits for the mothers as well. It promotes mother infant bonding, promotes uterine involution, and decreases the incidence of premenopausal breast cancer, ovarian cancer, and maternal osteoporosis. Recent studies demonstrate that breast feeding women have an earlier return to pre-pregnant weight and delayed resumption of ovulation leading to increase child spacing (1,2).

"In addition to individual health benefits, breast feeding provides significant social and economic benefits to the nation, including reduced health care costs and reduced employee absenteeism from care attributed to child illness. The significantly lower incidence illness in the breast fed infants allows the parents more time for attention to siblings and other family duties and reduced parents more time for attention to siblings and other family duties and reduced parental absence from work and lost income" (1).

Previous studies revealed that the decision to breast feed is usually made long before conception. These findings suggest t focus on adolescents as a target group for breast feeding promotion, since they are potential mothers (8, 11, 13, and 15). This is the reason for targeting female university students in this study.

The aim of this study was to assess the knowledge and attitude of female university student in Sharjah towards breast feeding. The specific objective was to determine how much they know about specific important and relevant aspects of breast feeding. Another objective was to assess the factors that affect the decision whether to breast feed or not.

A similar study was carried out in Saudi Arabia in 1997 at the Dammam collage of girls. The aim of the study was to determine whether Saudi female collage students were prepared for successful breast feeding, and to assess their knowledge about relevant aspects of breast feeding. They found out that student with a high knowledge score were more likely to breast feed in future than those with low knowledge score. (8).

A randomized controlled trial in Canada in 2001 found out that students with previous exposure to breast feeding mothers or who were breast fed themselves or had siblings who were breast fed were more likely to intend to breast feed their children (7).

Another study was conducted in the United States in the year 2000 to evaluate the knowledge and attitudes of U.S. high school girls regarding infant feeding. Girls who were breast fed were more likely to plan to breast feed (83% vs. 35%), as were girls with exposure to breast feeding (62% vs. 45%). The study concluded that teenagers are an important target group for breast feeding promotion (13).

An article published in the journal of Pediatrics in 1995 stated that "in a group of adolescent girls, more positive attitude toward and increase knowledge about breast feeding have been associated with a higher likelihood of considering breast feeding" in future (11).

A study carried out in Fujairah in UAE showed "a significant inverse relationship with the level of general education of the mothers for breast feeding at 6 months" post delivery (17).

Methodology

This was a cross sectional study carried out among female students of Sharjah University attending summer course 2002.

The University of Sharjah has separate buildings for men and women students. It is located in the University City, which also houses the American university of Sharjah, the Sharjah higher collages of Technology, and Sharjah policy academy. It is part of Muwaylih suburb that lies about 12 kilometers from the City Center. The university has 6 collages including: collage of Islamic Sharia, collage of Law, collage of Arts and sciences. Collage of Business and Management, collage of Engineering and collage of health and science. There are 2388 female students in the university among which 300 students were in the university hostel during the summer course.

Sample:

300 questionnaires were distributed in the hostel of Sharjah University in July 2002 during the summer course. The response rate was 65.3% (196 questionnaires). The questionnaires were kept in a room specially assigned for the students to sign in. The students were given adequate time to answer the questionnaire and return it back to the supervisor. Of the total questionnaire distributed, 34.7% did not return the questionnaire.

Questionnaire:

Initially a pilot study was done in which the questionnaire distributed was in English. The students found it difficult to understand the medical terms in English and requested to translate it to Arabic. Translation was done and the final questionnaire in Arabic was distributed to the target group.

The questionnaire had three main parts. The first part enquired personal information, which includes name, telephone number, and date of birth, nationality, and marital status, number of children, collage, year level, religion, education and occupation of both parents.

The second part included 10 questions assessing the knowledge of the student regarding the following aspects of breast feeding. The meaning of exclusive breast feeding, the meaning of partial breast feeding, weaning, colostrums, what colostrums is good for, best time to start weaning feeds, best time to start breast feeding, frequency of breast feeding, the duration of each feed and the duration of exclusive breast feeding.

All the questions were multiple choice questions except the question on the meaning of colostrums in which the student had to write the answer.

The last part addressed the attitude of the students toward breast feeding in the future.

Statistical Analysis:

Data were analyzed using a personal computer employing Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 10. The statistical significance was assessed using chi-square tests (Pearson chi-square, continuity correlation, likelihood ration, fisher's exact test). P value >0.05 was considered significant.

Results

Among the 300 questionnaires distributed, 196 questionnaires were given back which correspond to a response rate of 65.3%.

The mean age was 20.2 years. The minimum age was 18 years and the maximum age was 30 years. 79.9% were UAE nationals and 20.1% were non UAE nationals. 95.4% were singles, while only 4.6% were married. The question inquiring about the collage to which the student belongs, was unanswered by most of the students, as there were no choices made to choose from. 41.1% were in the first year, 42.1% in the second year, 15.8 % in the second year, 15.8 5 in the third year, and 1.1 % in the forth year. All of the students were Muslim.

The question regarding the student's mother's education showed that 27.7 % were illiterate, 17.9 % had primary education, and 17.4 % preparatory, 15.4 % secondary, and 21.5 % had university education. 12.6 % were working, while 87.9 % were not working.

The education of the student's fathers revealed that 23 % were illiterate, 18.3 % had primary education, and 17.3 % preparatory, 17.3 % secondary, and 24.1 % had university education. 76.9 % of the fathers were working, while 23.1 % were non working.

There were four questions addressing the past history of the student regarding breast feeding. The following was found: 49.7 % had previous educational programs on breast feeding, 14.9 % was through media. The second question showed that 97.4 % of the students have seen their mother or another women breast feed. 87.2 % of the students have helped their mothers to care for a younger sibling. The last question revealed that 88.8 % of the students were breast fed as infants.

The questionnaire contained 10 knowledge questions about the meaning of exclusive breast feeding, the meaning of partial breast feeding. Weaning, colostrums, what colostrums is good for, best time to start weaning feeds, best time to start breast feeding, frequency of breast feeding, the duration of each feed, and duration of exclusive breast feeding.

8.2 % gave the correct answer for the question on the meaning of exclusive breast feeding, which is breast milk plus medicine if necessary. 57.7 % gave the correct answer for the question on the meaning of partial breast feeding, which is breast milk plus bottle feeding.

3.6 % gave the correct answer for the question on the meaning of weaning, which is to continue breast feeding and introduce new feeds. 39.8 % gave the right meaning of colostrums. 39.3 % gave the right answer on the question regarding the best time to introduce weaning feeds, which is 6 months. 51.0 % answered that colostrums is good for immunity. 20.9 % answered correctly that breast feeding should be initiated within half an hour after delivery.

Regarding the frequency of breast feeding, 49 % answered that it should be on demand. Pertaining to the duration of each breast feed, 46.9 % answered that the baby should be breast fed till he / she releases the breast. Regarding the duration of exclusive breast feeding, 6.6 % gave the right answer, which is 6 months.

Our last question addresses the attitude of the student regarding breast feeding. 95.4 % of the students are willing to breast feed in the future.

Significant correlation:

There was statistically significant correlation between being breast fed as an infant and willing to breast feed in the future, p value was 0.004. Of the group which was not breast fed, 81 % of the students were willing to breast feed in the future. On the other hand, in the breast fed group 98.2 % were willing to breast feed.

A significant correlation was found between answering the question on the meaning of colostrums and having previous educational programs on breast feeding. 29.6 % of the students who did not have educational programs on breast feeding, knew the meaning of colostrums. On the other hand, 50.5 % of the students who had educational programs on breast feeding, knew the meaning of colostrums.

Discussion

In the current study, there was a statistically significant correlation between being breast fed as an infant and willing to breast feed in the future. The same correlation was found in two other studies done in Canada in 2001 (7) and in the United States in 2000 (13).

A significant correlation was found out between having previous educational programs on breast feeding and knowing the meaning of colostrums (50.5 % vs. 29.6 %). In the Saudi study a knowledge score was given to the student. They found out that the absence of education on breast feeding was reflected in low knowledge score shown by the results (8).

The analysis showed that the nationality, the marital status, the education and occupation of the student's mothers, education and occupation of their fathers, whether the students had seen their mothers or other ladies breast feeding, or helped their mothers care for younger siblings, were all not significantly associated with the decision to breast feed in the future. Similar findings were given by the Saudi study (8). The Canadian study on the other hand, found out that the students with previous exposure to breast feeding mothers or had siblings who were breast fed, were more likely to intend to breast feed their children (7).

Despite the high percentage (95.4 %) of the student willing to breast feed, most of their answers regarding the knowledge questions about breast feeding were wrong. There was a general lack of knowledge among the student about the meaning of exclusive breast feeding. More than third of the students (38.3 %), thought that water should be added to the breast milk. A study done in Eastern Tobago showed that sustained exclusive breast feeding for the first 6 months postpartum was not highly valued (6). Similarly, in the current study only 6.6 % of the student thought that the baby should be breast fed exclusively for 6 months, which is a very low percentage.

A sizable number of students (39.8 %) knew the meaning of the word colostrums. Others said that they don't know or gave incomplete definitions. On the other hand more than half of the students (51 %), knew that colostrums are good for immunity.

It was discouraging to find that only 20.9 % of the students knew that breastfeeding should be initiated within half an hour after delivery. The earlier the first breast feed is initiated, the longer the mother will breast feed. In addition, early suckling helps milk production and psychological bonding (4,8).

Demand breast feeding is becoming the norm in most maternity wards world wide. It means giving the baby the breast when he or she cries (8). About half of the students (49.0 %) thought that the baby should fed on demand, which is a reassuring response. Demand feeding is the corner stone of mother-baby bonding, since the baby should always be with the mother. Interestingly, 46.9 % of the students thought that the baby should be breast fed till he or she releases the breast. This should be encouraged so that the baby can get the high fat, calorie-rich hind milk (4).

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study showed a positive attitude towards breast feeding among young female students in Sharjah. However, they lack the knowledge for successful breast feeding in future. This implies that there maybe a need for educational programs on breast feeding in the high school and universities curricula. Moreover, media can play an important role in teaching and updating the new concepts on breastfeeding, and t discourage the wrong myths in the society.

Finally, primary health care physicians can visit high schools and universities to encourage and update the students on breast feeding and answer their questions.

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