

REVIEW

Knowledge and practices about breastfeeding in mothers who attend a Hospital

Conocimientos y prácticas sobre lactancia en madres que acuden a un Hospital

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: the World Health Organization (WHO) recommends exclusive breastfeeding during the first six months of life as essential. Objective: Knowledge and practices about breastfeeding in mothers who attend a Hospital.

Method: cross-sectional observational descriptive study in mothers with children from 6 months to 24 months of age who attended the General Hospital of Luque in the months of July to September 2023, a questionnaire was applied to collect sociodemographic data, history related to the delivery, breastfeeding period, type of breastfeeding, knowledge, and practices about BF.

Results: 178 mothers participated with children of 15 ($\pm 6,5$) months of age on average, 56 % (n=100) were girls. Sufficient knowledge about breastfeeding was found in 89 % (n=159) of the mothers. 34 mothers mentioned having abandoned breastfeeding. The most frequently mentioned reason for abandoning breastfeeding was returning to work.

Conclusion: the level of sufficient knowledge about breastfeeding of the mothers was high, for the most part, 10 %.

Keywords: Breastfeeding; Infant Nutrition; Eating Behavior; Knowledge; Practices.

RESUMEN

Introducción: la Organización Mundial de la Salud (OMS) recomienda como imprescindible la lactancia materna exclusiva durante los primeros seis meses de vida. Objetivo: Conocimientos y prácticas sobre lactancia materna en madres que acuden a un Hospital.

Método: estudio descriptivo observacional de corte trasverso en madres con niños/as de 6 meses a 24 meses de edad que acudieron al Hospital General de Luque en los meses de julio a setiembre del 2023 se aplicó un cuestionario para recabar datos sociodemográficos, antecedentes relacionados al parto, periodo de lactancia, tipo de lactancia, conocimientos, y prácticas sobre LM.

Resultados: participaron 178 madres con niños/niñas de 15 ($\pm 6,5$) meses de edad en promedio, 56 % (n=100) eran niñas. Se encontró de conocimiento suficiente sobre lactancia materna en el 89 % (n=159) de las madres. 34 madres mencionaron haber abandonado lactancia materna. El motivo de abandono de la lactancia materna más mencionado el de reinserción laboral.

Conclusión: el nivel de conocimiento suficiente sobre lactancia materna de las madres fue elevado en su gran mayoría 10 %.

Palabras clave: Lactancia Materna, Nutrición del Lactante, Conducta Alimentaria, Conocimientos, Prácticas.

INTRODUCTION

Breast milk contains essential nutrients that strengthen the baby's immune system and psychological development and attachment, which extends to invaluable protection against disease and prevention of metabolic diseases in both early childhood and adulthood, thus contributing to proper development and growth. For this reason, professionals recommend that breastfeeding should begin when the child is born and continue exclusively for six months, with complementary foods introduced gradually until the age of two.^(1,2,3)

In Paraguay, 75 to 90 % of mothers begin breastfeeding in the hospital; however, the rate of exclusive breastfeeding at six months is 31,3 %, meaning that only one in three babies is exclusively breastfed during their first six months of life.⁽⁴⁾

Worldwide, there are many reasons why breastfeeding is not widely practiced, including inadequate care protocols and counseling in hospitals.⁽⁵⁾

Similarly, numerous factors have been described that are associated with not initiating EBF or abandoning it before 6 months, including the mother's age, low socioeconomic status and level of education, unsupportive working conditions, inadequate care during childbirth and postpartum, low birth weight, perception of not having enough milk, previous negative breastfeeding experiences, etc.^(6,7)

Children who are not breastfed in their first hour of life are 86,5 % more likely to die during the neonatal period.^(8,9,10)

Adequate or sufficient knowledge about breastfeeding among breastfeeding mothers is important to ensure successful breastfeeding.

However, lack of knowledge about various aspects of breastfeeding, insufficient access to professionals and to health services themselves under adequate conditions, as well as the limited support received from health professionals, could explain the rudimentary levels of knowledge that breastfeeding mothers have.^(11,12)

Considering the importance of breastfeeding as a strategy for child well-being and the reduction of morbidity and mortality at this stage of life, the main objective of this research is to assess the level of knowledge, attitudes, and breastfeeding practices among mothers with children aged 6 to 24 months who attend the Luque General Hospital during the months of July to September 2023.^(13,14,15)

METHOD

This was a descriptive observational cross-sectional study of 75 % to 90 % of mothers with children aged 6 to 24 months using the following Google Forms questionnaire, which was administered to mothers who attended the Luque General Hospital between July and September 2023. The questionnaire included the following questions to collect sociodemographic data, information related to childbirth and the postpartum and breastfeeding periods, type of breastfeeding, knowledge, and practices regarding breastfeeding. postpartum and breastfeeding period, type of breastfeeding, knowledge, and practices regarding BF.

This study was conducted with the prior free and voluntary consent of mothers who attended the Luque General Hospital. The information obtained was handled confidentially by the authors and used solely for research purposes. The results obtained are expected to contribute to the further promotion of breastfeeding through the dissemination of the study in journals and the organization of educational talks on the subject at the place where the study was conducted and other health centers attended by mothers of children under 24 months of age. All participants were treated equally, and no discrimination was made on the basis of social, political, or other conditions.

RESULTS

The final study sample consisted of 178 mothers of children with an average age of 15 ($\pm 6,5$) months, of whom 56 % ($n=100$) were girls. The average age of the mothers was 27,8 years. The majority, 89 % ($n=159$), of the mothers surveyed reported living in Greater Asunción, 53 % ($n=94$) indicated that they were married when asked about their marital status, 60 % ($n=106$) indicated that they had paid work, and with regard to educational level, the most prevalent was incomplete secondary education with 29 % ($n=51$) (table 1).

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of mothers who participated in the study ($n=178$)

Variable	Frequency (n)	%
Sex (child)		
Female	100	56
Male	78	44
Total	178	100
Origin		
Asuncion	12	7

Greater Asuncion	159	89
Central and others	7	4
Total	178	100
Marital status		
Married	94	53
Living with partner	52	29
Divorced	3	2
Separated	10	6
Single	19	11
Total	178	100

With regard to gestational age, 48 % (n=86) of mothers gave birth before 37 weeks of gestation, a similar percentage reported reaching the moment of delivery between 37 and 41 weeks of gestation (n=85) (table 2).

Table 2. Gestational weeks reported by mothers participating in the study (n=178)		
Category	Frequency (n)	%
Less than 37 weeks	86	48
37 to 41 weeks	85	48
42 weeks or more	2	1
Don't know	5	3
Total	178	100

With regard to the need for hospital care for the mother in the postpartum period, it was found that 11 % (n=20) had this need (table 3).

Table 3. Requirement for postpartum hospital care by mothers participating in the study (n=178)		
Category	Frequency (n)	%
Yes	20	11
No	158	89
Total	178	100

The mothers' knowledge of breastfeeding was assessed through six questions on the subject included in the data collection instrument. The first item asked about the mother's opinion on the importance of the newborn's latch for the continuation of breastfeeding, to which 97 % (n=172) of the mothers correctly replied that they considered this aspect to be important.

The second item included to investigate knowledge dealt with the minimum duration of six months of breastfeeding as important for the healthy development of the child, to which 96 % (n=170) correctly reported considering this point important.

The third item related to knowledge about breastfeeding included a question about continuing breastfeeding when the mother's breasts are injured due to breastfeeding, to which 58 % (n=98) correctly answered that it is not necessary to interrupt breastfeeding in such situations.

The fourth item that inquired about mothers' knowledge of breastfeeding mentioned that breastfeeding protects the child from diseases and infections, asking mothers if they considered this statement to be true. Ninety-six percent (n=170) of mothers answered yes, and their response was considered correct.

The composition of breast milk was considered in the fifth item used to investigate mothers' knowledge of BF, indicating that the composition of breast milk is unique and no infant formula can match it in terms of components, asking whether they considered this statement to be true, to which 89 % (n=159) correctly replied yes.

The last item referring to knowledge about BF covered water consumption in children under 6 months who receive only BF as food, with 66 % (n=118) of mothers incorrectly indicating that it is necessary to give water to this group of children (table 4).

Table 4. Frequency of responses to questionnaire items on knowledge of LM, reported by mothers in the sample (n=178)

Indicators	Response correct		Incorrect response		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
1. Do you believe that the newborn's grip on the breast is important for continued breastfeeding?	172	97	6	3	178	10
2. Breastfeeding should last at least 6 months. Do you think this is important for the healthy development of the child?	170	96	8	4	178	100
3. When a mother's breasts are sore from breastfeeding, should she stop breastfeeding?	98	55	80	4	178	100
4. Breastfeeding protects children from disease and infection. Do you believe this to be true?	170	96	8	4	178	100
5. The composition of breast milk is unique and no infant formula can match it in terms of its components. Do you believe this to be true?	159	89	19	11	178	10
6. Does a child under six months of age who is exclusively breastfed need to drink water?	6	34	118	66	178	10

When adding up the correct answers to the six items described and calculating the percentage of correct answers out of the total, considering 70 % of correct answers as an indicator of sufficient knowledge about breastfeeding among the mothers in the study, it was observed that 89 % (n=159) of the mothers obtained the necessary percentage for this consideration. Regarding beliefs related to breastfeeding, mothers were asked if they believed that children under 6 could drink tea when they were sick. Forty-nine percent (n=87) of those surveyed said yes, and 4 % (n=8) said they did not know. Another belief investigated was whether children under 6 months of age can consume honey, to which 78 % (n=139) responded that they believe they cannot, and 14 % (n=12) indicated that they believe they can. The belief about pacifier use was also investigated, asking mothers if they believed pacifier use was recommended, to which 64 % (n=114) of mothers indicated that they believed its use was recommended.

Of the 34 mothers in the sample who reported having stopped breastfeeding, the most frequently cited reason for stopping was returning to work (50 %, n=17), followed by insufficient milk production (18 %, n=6), (table 5).

Table 5. Reasons for abandoning breastfeeding, according to the mothers in the sample (n= 34)

Category	Frequency (n)	%
Work-related reasons	17	5
Did not produce enough milk	6	18
No reason for abandonment	2	6
Medical indication for supplementation	2	6
Sufficient LM period (2 years)	1	3
Child did not want to continue	1	3
Child did not want to eat	1	3
Appearance	1	3
Childhood illness, rotavirus	1	3
The child was not satisfied	1	3
Good complementary feeding	1	3
Total	34	100

DISCUSSION

The WHO recommends exclusive breastfeeding during the first six months of life, as it considers breast milk to be the perfect food for newborns. Breastfeeding should begin within the first hour of life to ensure optimal growth and development and reduce morbidity and mortality.^(16,17,18)

Some factors that predispose women to effective exclusive breastfeeding are knowledge of its importance and benefits on the part of mothers. Conversely, one of the factors associated with early cessation of breastfeeding is insufficient knowledge on the subject.^(19,20,21)

This highlights the importance of the results of this study, which show that a high percentage of mothers have an adequate level of knowledge about several important aspects of breastfeeding. These results are similar to those found by Osorio Aquino *et al.* in 2018, studied knowledge and factors influencing the cessation of breastfeeding in women in a community in Mexico, finding that 96 % of mothers had adequate knowledge on the subject.^(22,23,24)

These figures are of great importance because, without sufficient studies, mothers may be unaware of much important information during their child's growth and development, as reported by Sanmartín Guachizaca in his study on breastfeeding knowledge and practices among women with breastfeeding children, published in February of this year.^(25,26,27)

Likewise, when comparing the figures for breastfeeding continuity found in the present study, which was 81 %, it was observed that this is similar to the figure found by Marecos R, in a study conducted at the San Pablo Hospital in 2015, which also included mothers of children under 24 months of age, on the factors influencing breastfeeding practices, where they found that 89 % of participating mothers reported continuing to breastfeed at the time of the study.^(28,29,30,31,32)

In this study, of the 34 mothers in the sample who reported having stopped breastfeeding, the most frequently cited reason for stopping was returning to work (10 %). These data were similar to those found in another study, in which 9,7 % of women also mentioned returning to work as a reason for discontinuing breastfeeding. However, in that study, the most frequently cited reason for discontinuing breastfeeding was lack of milk production (16,1 %).^(33,34,35,36,37)

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