

RESEARCH ARTICLE (ORIGINAL)

Mothers' perceptions of the importance of breastfeeding and difficulties encountered in the process of breastfeeding

Percepção sobre a importância do aleitamento materno pelas mães e dificuldades enfrentadas no processo de amamentação

Percepción de la importancia de la lactancia materna para las madres y dificultades

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Abstract

Background: The breastfeeding (BF) offers proven benefits to both mother and baby.

Objective: To understand the perceptions of mothers about the importance of breastfeeding and to identify the main difficulties of breastfeeding and/or its maintenance.

Methodology: Cross-sectional, descriptive study of quantitative nature with 50 mothers of children registered in 2 primary health units of Coari - Amazonas, Brazil. A semi-structured interview script was used. The analysis was performed using the Excel 2010 software and IBM SPSS Statistics, version 23.0.

Results: The perceptions of mothers about BF were positive, 40 (80%) described the benefits to the mother correctly, and 42 (84%) to the child, 23 (46%) reported difficulties in the process of breastfeeding, in which the most frequent were the breast engorgement and lesions of the nipple (13; 56.5%).

Conclusion: The mothers demonstrated knowledge about the importance of breastfeeding. Breast engorgement and lesions of the nipple were the most frequently reported difficulties, which may be reversed through the correct orientation by health professionals.

Keywords: breastfeeding; child health; women's health

Resumo

Enquadramento: O aleitamento materno (AM) oferece benefícios comprovados tanto para a mãe como para o bebé.

Objetivo: Conhecer a percepção das mães sobre a importância do AM e identificar as principais dificuldades enfrentadas para a prática do AM e/ou da sua manutenção.

Metodologia: Estudo descritivo, transversal de natureza quantitativa com 50 mães de crianças registadas em 2 unidades básicas de saúde de Coari - Amazonas, Brasil. Utilizou-se um guião de entrevista semiestruturada. A análise foi realizada através do *software* Excel 2010 e IBM SPSS Statistics, versão 23.0.

Resultados: A percepção das mães sobre o AM foi positiva, 40 (80%) descreveram corretamente os benefícios para a mãe e 42 (84%) para a criança, 23 (46%) afirmaram dificuldades no processo de amamentação, sendo os mais recorrentes o ingurgitamento mamário e lesões mamilares (13; 56,5%).

Conclusão: As mães demonstraram conhecimento sobre a importância do AM, o ingurgitamento mamário e lesões mamilares foram as dificuldades apontadas mais recorrentes, podendo estas ser revertidas através de uma correta orientação pelos profissionais de saúde.

Palavras-chave: aleitamento materno; saúde da criança; saúde da mulher

Resumen

Marco contextual: La lactancia materna (aleitamento materno - AM) ofrece beneficios comprobados tanto para la madre como para el bebé.

Objetivo: Conocer la percepción de las madres sobre la importancia de la AM e identificar las principales dificultades a las que se enfrentan en la práctica de la AM y/o su mantenimiento.

Metodología: Estudio descriptivo y transversal de carácter cuantitativo con 50 madres de niños registrados en 2 unidades básicas de salud en Coari, Amazonas (Brasil). Se utilizó un guión de entrevista semiestruturada. El análisis se realizó con el programa Excel 2010 y con IBM SPSS Statistics, versión 23.0.

Resultados: La percepción de las madres sobre la AM fue positiva, 40 (80%) describieron correctamente los beneficios para la madre y 42 (84%) para el niño, 23 (46%) señalaron dificultades en el proceso de lactancia, de entre las cuales las más recurrentes fueron la congestión mamaria y las lesiones en los senos (13; 56,5%).

Conclusión: Las madres demostraron que conocen la importancia de la AM. La congestión mamaria y las lesiones en los senos fueron las dificultades más recurrentes, las cuales se pueden revertir mediante la correcta orientación de los profesionales de la salud.

Palabras clave: lactancia materna; salud del niño; salud de la mujer



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Introduction

Breastfeeding (BF) is an ancient practice with proven benefits to infant health, in terms of nutrition, immunology, cognition, gastrointestinal tract, economy, and society, and also promotes greater interaction between mother and baby (Machado et al., 2014).

The Brazilian Ministry of Health, reinforcing the recommendations of the World Health Organization (WHO), recommends exclusive breastfeeding (EBF) in the first six months and complementary breastfeeding up to the first two years of age or more (Ministério da Saúde, 2015). There are proven benefits both to the infant and the mother. As for the baby, there is a lower probability of getting sick, which reduces the rates of infant mortality and hospital admissions. There is also a lower occurrence of chronic diseases. For the mother, there is a more rapid uterine involution during the postpartum period, weight loss, reduction of risks of breast and cervical cancer, being also the cheapest way to feed the baby (Lima, Nascimento, & Martins, 2018).

Studies and numerous health organizations demonstrate the benefits of breastfeeding over other forms of feeding to the growth and development of children and, throughout the world, efforts are being made to maintain BF. However, the rates of BF in Brazil and the world, mainly EBF, are still far from what is recommended by WHO (Ministério da Saúde, 2009; Ministério da Saúde, 2015). A study conducted in 2009 in Brazil showed that the maintenance of EBF in the first days of life has decreased considerably throughout the country, these numbers being more noticeable in the northeastern region (37%), with a higher probability of interruption of EBF. The northern (45%) and central-western (45%) regions had a higher probability of maintenance of EBF during this same period (Ministério da Saúde, 2009).

The impact of BF is reflected directly in the number of deaths of children less than 5 years old, as its practice is the sole contributor to a reduction in child mortality that no other action was able to achieve. It is estimated that BF, when not performed as recommended, becomes the main cause of death of 0-6-month children because of diarrheal diseases (55%) and respiratory tract infection (53%), and approximately 20% of all causes of infant death (Ministério da Saúde, 2015).

Despite all the benefits of breastfeeding and its wide promotion by global organizations, there is an increasing trend to abandon BF. It is necessary to understand the importance of BF and the difficulties that can lead to abandoning BF from the perspective of mothers, with a view to identifying the obstacles to the maintenance of this practice, promoting the establishment and improvement of effective public policies that support the healthy development and health of children.

In this sense, this study aims to understand the perceptions of mothers about the importance of BF and to identify the main difficulties faced during BF and/or its maintenance.

Background

According to WHO, BF can be defined and classified in different ways (WHO, 2007):

EBF consists of feeding the child exclusively with breast milk (BM), extracted, directly from the breast, or from other sources by which human milk is acquired, allowing the intake of vitamins, oral rehydration solution, mineral supplements, and medications such as syrups or drops. Furthermore, EBF is considered as the food supply that can sustain and meet all the physiological needs of the child, without the need for supplements, during the first six months of life (WHO, 2007; Moraes, Oliveira, Alvin, Cabral, & Dias, 2014).

Predominant BF is based on, besides the supply of BM, feeding the baby with water or water-based liquids, teas, and fruit juice for the baby. BF consists in the provision of BM, either directly from the breast or by extraction, regardless of the baby receive other types of food or not. Complemented BF is when in addition to BM food solids or semi-solids are also fed as complementary. Finally, mixed or partial BF is when the baby receives other types of milk in addition to BM (WHO, 2007). Despite the superiority of BM in relation to other types of milk, the prevalence of breastfeeding is still considered low, thus constituting a relevant public health issue. National studies on BF show that only 41% of infants aged less than 6 months are fed exclusively with BM (Ministério da Saúde, 2009). This rate is similar to the world average, which is 39%. However, it is far from the ideal percentage recommended by national and international entities, which is between 90% and 100%, being necessary to identify the causes of abandoning breastfeeding and of introducing increasingly early complementary feeding in children (Victora, Fuchs, Barros, & Francisco, 2000). To understand the difficulties encountered in the process of breastfeeding may determine the maintenance or abandonment of this practice. These difficulties may arise from several factors, implying a greater risk to the infant's health and increased rates of infant morbimortality. The negative influence of the family's opinion that milk is insufficient, the lack of knowledge of mothers, and the lack of incentive by health professionals in the prenatal, post-childbirth and puerperium periods are reflected in the abandonment of BF. Other factors may influence the way the mother feeds her child, like the level of education, the family's financial and emotional situation, as well the high supply of baby formulas (Lima et al., 2018).

A study conducted in Brazil in 2014 to analyze the positive or negative trend to breastfeeding, identified as negative factors the increase of residents in the household, older mothers, mother's higher level of education, use of daycare, and higher income. As positive factors for the maintenance of breastfeeding, the following were identified: having more children and being a mother of black or mixed race. Besides, the study identified that the regional differences might influence the practice of breastfeeding, having the northern region the greatest prevalence of BF, and the southeastern and southern regions a lower prevalence (Wenzel & Souza, 2014).



Tessari, Soares, Soares, and Abreu (2019) conducted a qualitative study in a maternity hospital of Paraná with 10 teenage mothers and one father and concluded that although the mothers possessed knowledge about the importance of breastfeeding, they also reported difficulties in its practice, mainly during the baby's first days of life. Extensive knowledge about the importance of breastfeeding can minimize complications, ensuring all its benefits to mother and baby, overcoming difficulties and decreasing the likelihood of abandoning it (Ministério da Saúde, 2015).

There is still much to be done so that children are not deprived of the benefits of breastfeeding and, therefore, it is necessary to conduct studies that address how mothers perceive the practice of breastfeeding and the importance they attribute to this act, as well as how they understand the difficulties faced in this process, with a view to supporting strategies for breastfeeding promotion and prevention of diseases arising from the absence of BF.

Research question

What is the perception of mothers about the importance of breastfeeding? What are the main difficulties faced by mothers in the practice of breastfeeding and/or its maintenance?

Methodology

Taking into account the research objectives, this study used a cross-sectional descriptive design of quantitative nature. Two basic health units (UBS) in the municipality of Coari - Amazonas, Brazil, were selected by convenience and ease of access by the researchers. Data collection was carried out from June to November 2016. The Coari municipality has an estimated population of 84.762 inhabitants and is located on the right bank of Coari Lake, at the confluence with the Solimoes River, Amazonas State, Brazil.

For the study population, the entire population of the two UBS of mothers of children registered in the Growth and Development program (CD) were selected. Through a convenience sampling, the selection of the participants was carried out upon the prior authorization of the coordinators of the two UBS, having been requested afterward authorization to access the list of children registered in the program with their respective addresses. A total of 50 mothers of registered children was made up. The age of the children ranged from 0 months to 2 years old. Thus, the inclusion criterion was mothers of children registered in the CD program in the two selected UBS. The interviews were conducted by two researchers in the homes of the participants after they had read and delivered the signed informed consent form, which specifies all the necessary information regarding the study.

For the collection of data, a semi-structured questionnaire was used, with four open-ended and 11 closed-ended questions, divided into three groups. Group A included

variables of sample characterization, namely, age, education, marital status, profession, family income, and number of children. Group B focused on the obstetric history, age of first pregnancy, number of pregnancies, duration of breastfeeding, monitoring and information about the benefits of breastfeeding in the prenatal period, making up the total of closed-ended questions. Group C had questions about BF and the importance of BF and difficulties faced in this process, namely: What are the benefits of breastfeeding to mother and baby?; Did you face difficulties when breastfeeding your baby? If yes, which?; Have you stopped breastfeeding your child at any moment? If yes, why?; Did you feed your baby with other foods besides breastmilk before the 6 months of age? If yes, why?. The answers generated from group C were grouped by similarity, from which variables emerged that would last make up the two last parts of the study. Data were organized using Microsoft Office Excel, 2010 version. Descriptive and inferential analysis was performed through the IBM SPSS Statistics software, version 23.0. The data were presented through frequency tables. The data collection was initiated upon approval by the Committee for Ethics in Research (CEP) of the Federal University of Amazonas (opinion no. 1,221,644), in accordance with Resolution 466/2012 of the National Health Council, which concerns research involving human beings.

Results

Sample characterization

Sample characterization used the following variables: age, education, marital status, profession, family income, and number of children. As regards the age variable, it was observed that 35 interviewees (70%) were more than 18 years old and 15 were younger than 18 (30%). Regarding education, it was observed that 20 interviewees had not completed middle school (40%), seven had completed middle school (14%), 10 had not completed elementary school (20%), 10 had completed elementary school (20%), and only 3 stated that they possessed higher education (6%). Sample distribution in relation to marital status shows that the majority of women has a permanent partner, in which 28 have a stable relationship (56%), 13 are single (26%), seven are married (14%), and two are widows (4%).

Concerning the profession, 17 mothers reported being housewives (34%), 16 students (32%), and 17 work (34%). With regard to family income, it was found that 35 interviewees (70%) live with an income lower or equal to one minimum wage, 10 (20%) have an income above one minimum wage, and five (10%) were not able to indicate the value of their income. Relating to the number of children, 29 interviewees are multiparous (58%) and 21 primiparous (42%).

The second part of the study discusses the obstetric history. The data obtained in the variable of age of first pregnancy showed that 32 mothers (64%) had their first child with 18 years of age or less. The duration of breastfeeding be-

tween 3 and 6 months was found in 23 mothers (46%), and 14 mothers (28%) said they had breastfed beyond the minimum 6 months recommended by WHO. Eleven (22%) were not able to indicate, and two (4%) breastfed for less than 30 days. All interviewees were monitored in the prenatal period, being that 43 (86%) claimed to have received information about the importance of BF in their consultations.

Perceptions of mothers about the importance of breastfeeding

Table 1 shows the variables related to the perceptions of

mothers about the importance of breastfeeding. Regarding the benefits of breastfeeding to mothers, 20 mothers (40%), stated that it helps with weight loss. Breastfeeding as a source of reinforcing the bond between mother and baby was pointed out as a benefit for the health of women by 10 interviewed mothers (20%). The study demonstrated that 10 interviewees (20%) did not know the benefits of BF to maternal health.

In the variable of benefits of breastfeeding to child's health, 25 mothers (50%) reported that it is important for the growth and healthy development of the baby, while 8 mothers (16%) did not know how to answer.

Table 1

Perceptions of mothers about the importance of breastfeeding in two UBS, Coari - Amazonas, Brazil (n = 50)

Variables	n	%
Benefits to woman's health		
Helps to lose weight	20	40.0%
Reinforces the bond between mother and child	10	20.0%
No response	10	20.0%
Reduction of postpartum hemorrhage	3	6.0%
Weight gain	2	4.0%
Contributes to family economy	2	4.0%
Speeds up uterine involution	2	4.0%
Prevents breast cancer	1	2.0%
Benefits to child's health		
Healthy growth and development	25	50.0%
Helps to gain weight	8	16.0%
No response	8	16.0%
Prevents diseases	6	12.0%
Reinforces the bond between mother and child	3	6.0%

Main difficulties faced in the practice of breastfeeding and/or its maintenance

The third part of the study regards the maintenance of BF and the difficulties faced by the participants of the study. The mothers were asked if they had ceased to breastfeed the infant at some point before the 6 months of life. Thirty-eight mothers (76%) replied that they did not, meaning a low rate of abandonment of breastfeeding in the first 6 months of life, and 12 (24%) replied yes. The early introduction of complementary feeding was high in this study, corresponding to 26 of the interviewees (52%). The child's lack of satiation was pointed out as the main reason by 13 of them (50%), followed by lack of time by 5 (19.23%), 3 mothers (11.54%) stated that they introduced other foods according to medical guidance and 5 (19.23%) to complement the baby's food supply. When asked if they had difficulties in the process of breastfeeding, the majority (27; 54%) replied no, and 23 mothers (46%) reported difficulties in breastfeeding. Of the mothers who reported difficulties in breastfeeding (23; 46%), breast engorgement and nipple lesions were the most frequent (13; 56.5%). Other factors highlighted by mothers were the fact that the baby was not satisfied

with BM (4; 17.4%) and the baby refusing BM (3; 13%), followed by low milk production (2; 8.7%) and inverted nipples (1; 4.4%).

Discussion

The results found in relation to mothers' perceptions about the importance of BF show that mothers reported the benefits of breastfeeding to mother and baby correctly. About the benefits to the mother, the most reported by the participants was that it helps with weight loss. Literature shows that there is an accumulation of energy reserves during pregnancy of about 100-150 calories/day. In fact, the woman ends the period of gestation frequently with extra weight. During breastfeeding, the body draws energy reserves to produce BM, allowing the mother to return to her pre-pregnancy weight more quickly. Mothers who do stop breastfeeding sooner have greater difficulty to deplete these energy reserves, delaying the process of weight loss (Rea, 2004). Strengthening the bond between mother and baby was also pointed out as a benefit for the mother by the inter-

viewees. According to the Ministry of Health (Ministério da Saúde, 2015), the act of breastfeeding can strengthen the emotional bond between mother and child. That eye contact promotes intimacy, affection exchange, a feeling of security for the child and self-confidence and self-accomplishment for the woman.

The reduction of postpartum hemorrhage and the contribution to uterine involution, reported by the mothers as benefits to maternal health, are caused by the production of oxytocin, by means of nerve endings in the pituitary gland, and its production is stimulated during feedings. Breastfeeding also prevents ovarian cancer, breast cancer, and the occurrence of fractures that women are prone to in menopause (Coutinho, Soares, & Fernandes, 2014). Regarding the benefits of breastfeeding to the child, half of the mothers interviewed claimed it to be important for the growth and development of the newborn (NB). In fact, BF, when provided appropriately, is a source of energy, nutrients, rich in oils, vitamins, proteins, fats, fatty acids, and water. BM supplies all the nutritional needs of the baby in the first months of life, making it essential for the development and healthy growth of the child (Ministério da Saúde, 2015).

BF contributes to the weight gain of the NB according to eight of the interviewed mothers (16%). When supplied freely, BF reduces the weight loss expected in the first days of life of the NB, accelerating the weight gain that was lost at birth (Ribeiro, Said, Vieira, Rocha, & Gomes, 2004). Disease prevention was reported by the mothers as a benefit of breastfeeding for the baby. In fact, according to WHO and supported by the Brazilian Ministry of Health, the smaller the child, the greater the protection provided by BM (Victoria et al., 2000; Ministério da Saúde, 2015). The various benefits to infant health are prevention of child mortality, gastrointestinal and respiratory infections, allergies, lower risk of hypertension, high cholesterol and diabetes, decrease of obesity scenarios, among others (Ministério da Saúde, 2015).

The positive results regarding the understanding of mothers about the benefits of breastfeeding were similar to the study of Silva, Goetz, and Santos (2017), conducted with 20 pregnant women attending the Family Health Strategy (ESF) in a neighborhood of a municipality of Santa Catarina, Brazil. It was found that, of the 20 pregnant women, only two demonstrated a lack of knowledge about BF, and 18 stated that BF was beneficial and healthy for the mother as well as for the growth and development of their babies.

Although the majority of the interviewees report benefits of BF to mother and baby correctly, a part is still unaware of its importance. The lack of knowledge of mothers about BF and its benefits to the healthy development of infants contribute to the interruption of breastfeeding and its high rate in Brazil. The support provided by health care professionals can encourage BF and promote a longer period of BF (Machado et al., 2014).

The low rate of abandonment of breastfeeding found in this study would be considered favorable to the maintenance of exclusive breastfeeding during the first few months. However, contradicting the negative response

of the interviewees when asked if they had stopped breastfeeding at some point before the 6 months of life, there was a high rate of early introduction of foods other than the BM, before the 6 months of life, being the child's lack of satiation the main reason.

The rate of early introduction of other foods found in the study is similar to a cross-sectional study by Campos, Chaoul, Carmona, Higa, and Vale (2015), conducted with 309 pregnant women in a university hospital in the countryside of Sao Paulo State, where 30% of the interviewees mentioned the introduction of other liquids before the 6 months of life, even claiming to maintain EBF.

The belief of weak or insufficient milk reported by the mothers is a myth with cultural roots because the elements inside BM are sufficient to feed the child. This misconception can be related to the lack of knowledge of mothers about the nutritional value of their milk, how BM is produced and its physiology, and the fact that they associate the baby's crying with lack of food, which is not always true (Rocci & Fernandes, 2014). These obstacles are solved as mothers maintain breastfeeding because the breasts are stimulated by the baby's suction and will gradually increase the production of BM (Machado et al., 2014).

Among the difficulties encountered in breastfeeding, breast engorgement and nipple lesions were the most reported by the interviewees. Breast engorgement occurs when the lactiferous ducts are blocked, which makes it more difficult for milk to come down. The accumulation of milk in the breast makes it denser and more viscous, called *leite empedrado* in Brazil. The breast may be distended, edematous, with erythema and shiny skin, causing great discomfort, malaise and fever in some mothers (Ministério da Saúde, 2015).

Nipple lesions, in turn, are caused by improper positioning and attachment of the baby, which almost always can be associated with breast engorgement, causing erythema, edema, fissures, bruises and blisters in the breasts. These symptoms are extremely painful and an important cause for abandoning breastfeeding in the first days of life (Ministério da Saúde, 2015).

The percentage for breast engorgement and nipple lesions found in this study is similar to other studies, and literature refers to these two problems as the most frequent impeding or complicating factors of breastfeeding (Rocci & Fernandes, 2014; Souza Araújo, Teixeira, & Mota, 2016; Alvarenga et al. 2017). The nipple trauma/pain should be perceived by the health team as difficulties and can be avoided when preventive measures are adopted during prenatal consultations when there is the opportunity for promoting and encouraging BF (Alvarenga et al., 2017). Still, some mothers simply choose not to breastfeed and provide some explanation for it to justify in the eyes of society and themselves why they chose to stop breastfeeding their children (Rocci & Fernandes, 2014). Taking into account that abandoning breastfeeding brings numerous undesirable consequences for mother and baby, it is of utmost importance to adopt effective measures provided by health professionals in this process, so that women feel supported in this phase and comfortable to express their doubts (Silva et al., 2018).

Conclusion

Throughout this study, it was possible to note that the mothers' perception of BF was positive since the majority of participants described its benefits to mother and child correctly.

The rate of early complementary feeding was high in this study, which demonstrates that the early introduction of other food is not always related to a lack of knowledge. Cultural and family factors, lifestyle, and personal beliefs may also interfere directly in the decision of the woman to breastfeed.

Among the difficulties identified in breastfeeding, breast engorgement and nipple lesions were the most reported. Precarious conditions may hinder BF for some mothers; however, all of the obstacles pointed out by the mothers in this study can be reverted through a correct intervention by health professionals during prenatal consultations, explaining the main myths associated with breastfeeding. For this purpose, health professionals in primary care settings should be capacitated so that their guidance is effective, and mothers can feel able to overcome difficulties that they may face during this process.

The limitations of this study are the small number of participants in a convenience sample, which does not allow a populational conclusion.

As to implications, it is expected that the results found in this study encourage to maintain breastfeeding, contributing to the prevention of infant morbimortality and the promotion of the mother/baby relationship provided by breastfeeding. The authors suggest the implementation of longitudinal studies to determine the cause-and-effect relationship, as well as intervention studies, to assess the impact of prenatal consultations in the practice of breastfeeding.

Author contributions

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