

Nurturing New Life: Examining Pregnant Women's Knowledge and Perception of Prenatal Care and Breastfeeding

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ABSTRACT

Background: The health of pregnant women and their newborns is critical. Prenatal care and breastfeeding are fundamental components of optimal maternal and child health. Despite the well-recognized importance of these practices, the worldwide prevalence of suboptimal antenatal care and breastfeeding remains high. The lack of awareness and knowledge among pregnant women regarding these practices is a leading cause. This study aimed to explore the attitudes, knowledge, and practices of pregnant women regarding antenatal care and breastfeeding.

Objective: to identify critical areas for intervention and highlight gaps in knowledge to offer a foundation for future research and awareness-raising.

Methodology: A cross-sectional study was conducted in Lahore from 1st of January, 2022 to 1st of March, 2022. The data was collected of pregnant women from Ghurki Trust Teaching Hospital, Lahore, For this cross Sectional survey 400 pregnant women, ranging from <20 to 40 years or above were approached.

Results: The majority of the respondents had education up to secondary level, and half had their previous baby delivered at home. The findings revealed that the majority of pregnant women had visited less than four times for prenatal checkups during the current pregnancy and expressed a willingness to come for proper prenatal checkups in their next pregnancy.

Practical Implication: In order to achieve the best possible outcomes for both the mother and the baby, it is imperative to have educational programs aimed at enhancing the knowledge around prenatal care and breastfeeding practices amongst expectant mothers.

Conclusion: Respondents were aware of the benefits of breastfeeding, but their knowledge of optimal breastfeeding practices, including colostrum feeding, was insufficient. Addressing these gaps in knowledge and practice is essential through community awareness programs, health care provider training, and support mechanisms for new mothers. Ultimately, improving maternal and child health will enhance the welfare of families and the community as a whole.

Keywords: Pregnant, Knowledge and Perception, Prenatal Care, Breastfeeding

INTRODUCTION

Prenatal care comprises preventive care and consultation for pregnant women and aims to promote healthy pregnancies and positive perinatal outcomes. Appropriate prenatal care is associated with improved maternal and neonatal outcomes, including decreased morbidity and mortality rates during pregnancy, childbirth, and the postnatal period. Pakistan is among the countries with high maternal and neonatal mortality rates due to low utilization of antenatal care services and limited knowledge on breastfeeding. Among them two third of the mother have not received any counseling.¹ In Lahore, the government has implemented several programs and initiatives to promote prenatal care, including free antenatal care at public health facilities and community-based health education programs.

Breastfeeding is also a critical component of optimal maternal and child health. Breast milk provides essential nutrients and immune protection to newborns and has been linked with reduced infant morbidity and mortality, especially in low- and middle-income countries. Breast feeding is observed as custom in Pakistan but exclusive breast feeding rate low due to low knowledge level.² There are many associated factors but low awareness is major barrier.³⁻⁵ A comparative conducted by Zahid M & Muhammad N., 2017 showed that bottle fed children have higher frequency of Infection and low weight as compared to breast fed children.⁶⁻⁸

Around 37.6% of females said that they were facing problems during breast feeding including low milk supply (69%) followed by sore nipples (15%), low birth weight (12%) and breast infections (4%). Another important aspect highlighted that 40.1% females provided Ghuti as baby's first food; honey by 35.6%, green tea by 3% and Formula milk by 6.4%. Low prevalence was due to lack of proper knowledge regarding the early initiation of breast feeding among the newly delivered mother are especially with cesarean delivery.⁹

Despite the well-established benefits of antenatal care and breastfeeding, globally, many women do not receive adequate antenatal care or follow optimal breastfeeding practices. This situation can lead to adverse maternal and infant health outcomes, including neonatal deaths, malnutrition, and poor health development.

Improving the awareness, practices, and knowledge of antenatal care and breastfeeding among pregnant women will be the mainstay of reducing maternal and infant morbidity and mortality rates and improving the health and wellbeing of mothers, newborns, and future generations.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the importance and knowledge of prenatal care and breastfeeding among pregnant women in Lahore. The paper aims to highlight the role of prenatal care and breastfeeding in ensuring maternal and child health and wellness. It also addresses the significance of education and awareness in promoting prenatal care and breastfeeding.

METHODOLOGY

A cross-sectional study was conducted in Lahore from 1st of January, 2022 to 1st of March, 2022. The data was collected of pregnant women from Ghurki Trust Teaching Hospital, Lahore, Data was collected through a self-administered questionnaire, which was designed using standard guidelines. A total of 400 pregnant women were selected through convenient sampling from different healthcare facilities in Lahore. The inclusion criteria were pregnant women who visited healthcare facilities for antenatal care services. Those who were unwilling to participate or had language barriers were excluded. Data was analyzed using SPSS version.²²⁻²³

RESULTS

A total of 400 pregnant women participated in the survey, with age ranging from <20 to 40 years or above. Among the respondents,

248 (62%) had education up to secondary level and 187 (47%) had their previous baby delivered at home. Of those who had previous deliveries, 130 (33%) had their baby delivered by midwife and 161 (40%) by a doctor.

Regarding antenatal checkups, 236 (59%) had visited for less than 4 times, 147 (37%) for 4-7 times and only 17 (4%) for more than 7 times during the current pregnancy. (Figure 1)

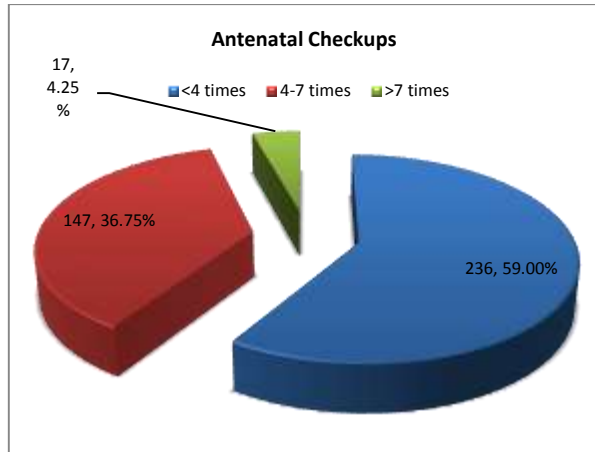


Figure 1: Frequency of Antenatal Checkups

Majority of the respondents (253; 63%) expressed willingness to come for a proper antenatal checkup in their next pregnancy. Furthermore, 222 (56%) believed that antenatal care is helpful in achieving a healthy pregnancy outcome, 258 (65%) believed it helps in detecting and resolving early pregnancy complications, and 312 (78%) believed it prepares and educates women regarding mode of delivery, breastfeeding, and care for the new-born. In addition, 217 (54%) believed that antenatal care is very useful in educating and resolving post-partum complications (including psychological causes), and only 41 (10%) were willing to come for post-partum follow-up if advised. (Table 1)

Table 1: Attitudes towards Antenatal Care

Attitude	Number of Respondents
Would come for next pregnancy antenatal checkup	253(63.25%)
Believe that antenatal care helps achieve a healthy pregnancy outcome	222(55.50%)
Believe that antenatal care helps detect and resolve early pregnancy complications	258(64.50%)
Believe that antenatal care prepares and educates women on mode of delivery, breastfeeding and care for newborns	312(78%)
Believe that antenatal care is useful in educating and resolving post-partum complications (including psychological causes)	217(54.25%)
Would come for post-partum follow-up if advised	41(10.25%)

In the domain of breastfeeding, most of the respondents were aware that breastfeeding protects against allergies, sickness, and obesity (107; 27%) and that it is nutritious (256; 64%). About 160 (40%) respondents agreed that breastfeeding creates bonding amongst mother and child and 188 (47%) believed it promotes healthy growth and development of a baby. A little over half of the respondents (172; 43%) believed that breastfeeding is a better option than formula milk and 268 (67%) planned to breastfeed exclusively after delivery. (Table 2)

Regarding knowledge about colostrum, 273 (68%) identified it as the milk secreted by the mother to be fed to the newborn baby, while 289 (72%) believed it to be the first milk secreted after birth to be discarded. Only 111 (28%) correctly recognized it as the milk that is important for preventing diseases in newborns and 247 (62%) believed it to be harmful for newborns. When asked about

the practice of colostrum feeding, 143 (36%) respondents reported doing it within 12 hours of birth, while a smaller number did it within 30 minutes (24; 6%), 1 hour (36; 9%), 6 hours (100; 25%), or 24 hours (97; 24%). (Table 3)

Table 2: Knowledge regarding Breastfeeding and Its Importance

Knowledge	Number of Respondents
Breastfeeding protects against allergies, sickness, and obesity	107(26.75%)
Breastfeeding is nutritious	256(64%)
Breastfeeding creates bonding between mother and child	160(40%)
Breastfeeding promotes healthy growth and development of baby	188(47%)
Breastfeeding is a better option than formula milk	172(43%)
Plan to exclusively breastfeed after delivery	268(67%)

Table 3: Knowledge regarding Colostrum

Questions asked assessing knowledge of colostrum	Number of Respondents
It is milk	273(68.25%)
First milk secreted after birth to be discarded	289(72.25%)
Milk secreted by mother to be fed to newborn baby	111(27.75%)
Harmful for newborn	247(61.75%)
Good for newborn health	122(30.50%)
Important to prevent diseases in newborn	148(37%)

Finally, when asked about their knowledge regarding the ideal time of weaning, 336 (84%) respondents believed that it should be done at 6 months, while 43 (11%) believed it to be at 3 months and only 17 (4%) at 1 year. 4 respondents (1%) reported not knowing the ideal time of weaning.

DISCUSSION

Breastfeeding is a cheaper mode of giving nutrition. It improves sensory and cognitive abilities and protect children from infectious and chronic diseases.¹⁰ a recent study showed that diarrhoea related morbidity and mortality was reduced 64% among breast fed neonates. Similarly it reduces severity of RSV and hospital stay by 70%.¹¹

It is observed that there are critical gaps in the attitudes, knowledge, and practices of antenatal care and breastfeeding among pregnant women. The majority of respondents had visited less than 4 times for antenatal checkups, which is sub-optimal. Furthermore, few respondents expressed willingness to attend postpartum follow-up appointments, which represents missed opportunities to detect and manage complications. These findings underscore the importance of developing effective awareness and education programs that emphasize the significance of antenatal and postnatal care in optimizing health outcomes among mothers and newborns.

Many women lack the basic knowledge of optimal breastfeeding practices, including colostrum feeding. Inadequate awareness of the importance of exclusive breastfeeding for six months can compromise the health and wellbeing of the mother and newborn. Additionally, a lack of knowledge regarding the best practices of breastfeeding might negatively affect timely initiation and colostrum feeding. Community health awareness programs such as health education materials, radio, and TV programs could be one effective method of increasing awareness and identifying the best practices to alleviate knowledge gaps and promote optimal maternal and child health practices.

The majority of our respondents expressed a willingness to attend for proper antenatal checkups in their next pregnancy, suggesting that the barriers might be low levels of awareness or a lack of prioritization around maternal and newborn health that needs to be addressed. These barriers to accessing antenatal care could be multifaceted and may include geographical distance, socio-economic status, and culture barriers, which healthcare

administrators need to consider in identifying appropriate measures to promote maternal and newborn healthcare practices.

The World Health Assembly (WHA) has set a global target in order to increase the rate of exclusive breast feeding for infants aged 0–6 months up to at least 50% in 2012–2025¹² As colostrum is associated with mode of delivery. Among C section female it is not possible for female to feed its first milk to newborn. Secondly it is custom that honey or bottle milk is fed to new born as first food⁹

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends exclusive breastfeeding for approximately 6 months after birth. It is also recommended by both AAP & WHO that along with breast feeding, appropriate complementary foods could be administered after 6 month.¹³ Breastfeeding in newborns of mothers with COVID-19 is safe with the adequate infection control measures to avoid mother-baby contagion.¹⁴ Its beneficial and protective effect were also observed during COVID pandemic.¹¹ Medical resources, diagnosis, and treatment must improve in developing countries. There are limited resources: access to medical and health resources; knowledge about disease; awareness, trainings, and awareness about health. The health literacy is mandatory for any disease and facilitates the patients with resources, databases, and trainings about disease.¹⁵⁻²¹

Overall, the survey highlights gaps in knowledge and practice among pregnant women regarding antenatal care and breastfeeding. Efforts to improve awareness and knowledge of maternal and child health are necessary to promote better health outcomes for mothers and newborns. The results of this study suggest that inadequate awareness, knowledge, and practices of antenatal care and breastfeeding among pregnant women are associated with adverse maternal and neonatal health outcomes. Addressing these gaps with effective community awareness programs, healthcare provider training, and support mechanisms for new mothers around the importance of antenatal care and optimal breastfeeding practices should be a priority. Such initiatives will enhance the health and wellbeing of the mother and newborn, reducing risk factors for maternal and neonatal morbidity and mortality, and promoting a future generation of healthy children, adults, and communities.

CONCLUSION

The survey findings emphasize the importance of educating and engaging pregnant women in antenatal care and breastfeeding practices. The interventions proposed herein will pave the way for improved maternal and child health outcomes, promoting healthy growth and development. A healthier and more informed mother and newborn will foster a future of healthy young children, healthy adults and healthy communities.

Attentive prenatal care is integral to detecting and mitigating any potential health hazards for both the mother and the developing fetus, whereas breastfeeding boasts a slew of benefits for the infant's health.

In order to achieve the best possible outcomes for both the mother and the baby, it is imperative to have educational programs aimed at enhancing the knowledge around prenatal care and breastfeeding practices amongst expectant mothers.

Interventions for Future Researches and Awareness: Further research is needed to understand the barriers to accessing antenatal care and promote awareness about its benefits among pregnant women in the community. Health care providers need to be trained to provide high-quality antenatal care and promote optimal breastfeeding practices. This could be achieved through increased investment in maternal and child health education programs.

Community awareness programs, particularly in rural areas, could help reduce the burden of maternal and child morbidity and mortality. These awareness programs could include information about the importance of antenatal checkups, the benefits of optimal breastfeeding, and colostrum feeding practices. Women's groups and lactation consultants could also play a critical role in supporting new mothers to breastfeed optimally.

Health care providers could support exclusive breastfeeding by promoting skin-to-skin contact and encouraging rooming-in so that mothers and newborns can be together. Breast milk can also be expressed and fed to babies with difficulty with breastfeeding.

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