



Original Research Article

## Knowledge and Attitude of College Students about Breastfeeding

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### ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** The demands of modern living, loss of support for the mothers, misconceptions about breastfeeding have affected breastfeeding practices and subsequently its duration in many developing countries. Inadequate knowledge, poor management capabilities coupled with negative attitude among physicians and other health care professionals have contributed in declining the breastfeeding rates.

**Objectives:** To assess the level of knowledge and attitude of college students regarding breastfeeding and determine the factors associated with breastfeeding. To educate them regarding breastfeeding

**Methodology:** A cross sectional survey of medical, nursing, dental & pharmacy students was conducted using a pretested, self-administered questionnaire from August 2011- February 2012.

**Results:** A total of 356 students from Medical (30.6%), Nursing (50.3%), Dental (9.3%) and Pharmacy (9.8%) colleges participated in the study. 64% students have average and 30.10% students have high level of knowledge about breastfeeding. Knowledge of students regarding breastfeeding in special situation was very low. Majority of students showed positive attitude towards breastfeeding. The level of knowledge and faculty of the student as well as sex of the student showed statistically significant association.

**Conclusion:** Knowledge of students regarding breastfeeding was generally inadequate. The students were aware about the benefits of breastfeeding to baby but majority of them could not give correct responses to questions related to advantages of breastfeeding to mother and breastfeeding in special situations. A majority of students showed positive attitude towards breastfeeding. Their attitudes towards breastfeeding and sexuality turned out to be negative. Breastfeeding being the most effective means of reducing the child mortality, should be given greater emphasis in the books and taught in detail to these future healthcare professionals.

**Key words:** Breastfeeding, Knowledge, Attitude, Advantages, Students

### INTRODUCTION

Breastfeeding is the ideal food for an Infant. Breastfeeding is considered as the most economical and easily accessible complete nutrition for newborn child. The advantages of breastfeeding include

nutritional, immunological & psychological benefits to both infant & mother, as well as economic & environmental benefits. [1] One of the most important challenges in the twenty first century is to make sure that

babies and young children receive a healthy & nutritious start in life.

Breast feeding plays an important role in achieving Millennium Development Goals.

MDG 1 – Reducing hunger and Poverty: Breastfeeding is the first step towards reducing under nutrition – from day one of life. It reduces household costs.

MDG 3- Gender equality: Breastfeeding enables an equal start for children regardless of family income. It empowers women through health and reproductive benefits, e.g. birth spacing. It also enables mothers to be self-sufficient in nourishing their infants without expending economic resources on expensive and inferior breast milk substitutes.

MDG 4 - Reduce child mortality: If all infants were exclusively breastfed for six months and continued breastfeeding to one year, under five mortality would reduce by about 14%.

MDG 5-Improve maternal health: Maternal health impact includes reduced risk of postpartum hemorrhage by early initiation of breastfeeding, protection from anemia and maternal iron depletion through lactational amenorrhea. It reduces the risk of breast and ovarian cancers.

The promotion and support of breastfeeding is a global priority with benefits for maternal and infant health, especially in low-income and middle-income countries where the relevance for child survival is undisputed.

Less than half (44 per cent) of newborns in the developing world are put to the breast within one hour of birth. Regional averages range from a high of 61% in Eastern and Southern Africa to a low of 39 per cent in South Asia and West and Central Africa. There is considerable difference in breastfeeding initiation among mothers from different households and from different regions. For example, in South Asia, children born in the richest households are

more likely to be breastfed within one hour of birth than those in the poorest households. However, the opposite is true in the Middle East and North Africa and East Asia and Pacific. In developing world it is only 44%.

<sup>[2]</sup> In India, early initiation of breastfeeding is 25% as per NFHS 3 survey. <sup>[3]</sup> Nearly 2/3 rd of women, 63% discarded colostrums before they began breastfeeding. <sup>[4]</sup>

All the infants below the age of 6 months should be exclusively breast fed. In all regions, the percentage of infants under the age of six months receiving the benefits of exclusive breastfeeding is less than 50 per cent. Rates are particularly low in West and Central Africa, East Asia and Pacific and Central and Eastern Europe/Commonwealth of Independent States (CEE/CIS). <sup>[2]</sup> In India, 46.3% of children age 0-5 months was exclusively breastfed & remaining 53.7% were exposed to risk of infection. <sup>[3]</sup>

Breastfeeding rates show marked social inequalities in higher-income countries, where a significant proportion of infants are not receiving the best nutritional start in life and resultant health benefits. One of these countries is the UK, which has one of the lowest breastfeeding rates in Europe, with rates conspicuously below those of Scandinavian countries; only 22% of UK infants receive any breast milk at age 6 months compared with 72% in Sweden. <sup>[2]</sup>

Protection by breast feeding is greatest for the youngest infants. A WHO collaborative study team showed that risk of death in infant increases if the child is breast fed for only few months of time. <sup>[5]</sup> The various interventions to prevent under 5 deaths were compared and it was found out that breast feeding alone can prevent 16% of under 5 deaths. <sup>[6]</sup> Edmond KM et al showed that as the timing of initiation of breast feeding postpones the risk of neonatal mortality increases. <sup>[7]</sup>

In spite of traditional breastfeeding practices in India, it has been observed that there

has been decline in breastfeeding practices due to some reasons such as increased extensive opportunities of employment among women , lack of information and support for the mothers, introduction of commercial baby foods and feeding bottles and also promotion of infant foods has been more extensive than spreading knowledge on breastfeeding. All result in increased incidence of malnutrition, infection and death among children. Infants are been hit hardest. In India about 27 million children born each year, about 1.9 million die before they see their first birthday. More than one million infants have been dying every year only because of improper breastfeeding practices. These are preventable deaths.

Traditionally, there were always experienced women at hand to help a new young mother-her mother, aunt, mother-in-law or a neighbour. Now, with the increasing number of nuclear families, especially in towns, there is often no such help forthcoming. A woman with her first baby may be unsure of how to put her to the breast .Putting the baby to the breast is very simple when one knows what to do, otherwise it can create many problems and an inexperienced mother may give up trying in frustration. To breast feed successfully, a woman must feel confident. This means that she must believe that she can do it. However, being inexperienced, she often listens to what others tell her to do. Therefore, she needs advice and support from friends and relatives who have themselves successfully breast fed their own babies. Her husband's support and understanding can also be of great help.

The importance of medical and paramedical personnel in providing correct information to mothers about proper feeding of infants and guiding them in case of

problems cannot be overemphasized. But, studies indicate that hospital and rural health personnel are inadequately prepared for this important task. [8,9]

School of medicine , nutrition , nursing & public health failed to include BF in their curricula in the past even though students were taught on the preparation and handling of breast milk substitutes. Health care professionals can play a vital role in promoting breastfeeding among infants. Studies from various countries have shown that although health professionals had positive attitude towards breastfeeding but their knowledge was inadequate. [10] Studies among college female students and school teachers also revealed incomplete knowledge and misconceptions regarding breastfeeding. [11,12]

The Theme for World Breastfeeding Week 2011 was “*Talk to Me! Breastfeeding – 3D experience*”. Usually we take Two-dimension Approach while dealing with Breastfeeding issues, time i.e. from pre pregnancy to weaning and place i.e. Home, Community, Health care system. THIRD dimension is “COMMUNICATION”. The theme deals with communication at various levels and between various sectors. The present study was conducted considering the present theme.

The present study was designed therefore to i) assess college students who are future healthcare professionals on their level of knowledge and attitude regarding the importance of breastfeeding, ii) determine factors associated with breastfeeding and iii) educate them regarding breastfeeding.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

A cross sectional survey of medical, nursing, dental & pharmacy students was conducted using a pretested self-administered questionnaire. The study was conducted during the period August 2011-

February 2012. Permission from the concerned authorities of the college was obtained prior to the conduct of the survey. Students were informed about the study & the questionnaire was distributed in the classroom. The questionnaire included questions on sociodemographic profile and questions related to knowledge and attitude of students about breastfeeding and sources of their information about breastfeeding. Parents of students who are educated up to inter and above are labeled as having high education level and below that as low education level. Depending upon income, they are categorized into High (Rs. 37800 & above), Middle (Rs. 11390- 37799) & Low (below Rs. 11390/-) income group. There were 25 questions related to initiation, duration, nutrients values, misconceptions and benefits (to both mother and baby) of breastfeeding to test knowledge of the students. Respondents indicated that each knowledge related question was correct or incorrect or that they did not know the answer. A “do not know” response was coded as a negative response. Each question was given one mark for correct answer. Depending upon the score, students are categorized as having: low (total score 0 to 8), average (total score 9 to 16) and high (total score 17 to 25) level of knowledge. The attitude section consisted of twenty one questions and measured using Likert scale. Each respondent was asked to rate each

question on a scale ranging from one which was strongly disagree to five which was strongly agree. The total attitude scores ranged from 21 to 105 and using the mean as the cut-off, attitude was considered as positive if the total scores were more than 63 while total scores of 63 and below were considered negative attitude.

After collecting the completed questionnaire, the topic breastfeeding practice was discussed in detail by using power point presentation. The teachers of respective colleges were also sensitized and involved in discussion. The queries related to breastfeeding if any were answered at the end of the presentation. The total study subjects were 356 college students. The data was analyzed by using various statistical tests.

## RESULTS

A total of 356 students from Medical (30.6%), Nursing (50.3%), Dental (9.3%) and Pharmacy (9.8%) college participated in the study. The age of respondents ranged from 18 to 27 years, with the mean of  $20.3 \pm 1.72$ . 96.7% students were in the age group of 18-23 years, 77% were female, 76.4% were Hindu by religion, 75.3% Of mothers of students were housewives. Only 1.4% of students have not heard about breastfeeding and the major source of information was course syllabus (40.2%).

**Table 1: Sociodemographic profile of the respondents**

Sociodemographic profile	N	Percentage
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	82	23.00
Female	274	77.00
Total	356	100.00
<b>Age</b>		
18-23	344	96.70
≥24	12	03.30
<b>Faculty</b>		
Medical	109	30.6
Nursing	179	50.3
Dental	33	09.30
Pharmacy	35	09.80
Total	356	100

<b>Religion</b>		
Christian	58	16.3
Hindu	272	76.4
Muslim	26	7.3
Total	356	100
<b>Residence</b>		
Rural	152	42.7
Urban	204	57.3
Total	356	100
<b>Education of Father</b>		
High education	185	52
Low education	171	48
Total	356	100
<b>Education of Mother</b>		
High education	146	41
Low education	210	59
Total	356	100
<b>occupation of Father</b>		
Professional	89	25
Business	90	25.3
Vending	15	4.2
Farming	111	31.2
Skilled worker	26	7.3
Unemployed	1	0.3
Retired	24	6.7
Total	356	100
<b>Occupation of Mother</b>		
Professional	36	10.1
Business	7	2
Vending	2	0.6
Farming	19	5.3
Skilled worker	1	0.3
Unemployed	5	1.4
Retired	7	2
Na	11	3.1
House wife	268	75.3
Total	356	100
<b>Total Income</b>		
High	91	25.6
Middle	112	31.5
Low	153	43
Total	356	100

Table no. 2 shows the correct responses to questions related to knowledge on breastfeeding. Though correct responses of question no. 2,6,21 shows that students have general knowledge about breastfeeding , responses on question no.1,11,17,18,20,3 shows that there is scope of improvement. It is observed from responses on question no. 4, 5,7,8,16,22 that majority of students know about the benefits of breastfeeding to baby (except responses on question no. 23, 24) .Most of the students are unaware about benefits of breastfeeding to mother

(Responses on question no.12, 13, 14, 15). Almost 90% of students gave correct responses to questions (no. 9 & 10) on breastfeeding in special situation except about question no. 19 &25.

Table no.3 shows that 64% students have average and 30.10% have high level of knowledge about breastfeeding. Level of knowledge is significantly high among females (Table No.4) and among medical and nursing students (Table No.6).No significant association was found between religion and level of knowledge. (as shown in Table no 5)

**Table: 2 Number and percentage of respondents to questions related to knowledge on breastfeeding (n= 356)**

Sr No	Questions related to breastfeeding	Correct responses	
		N	Percentage
1	Breastfeeding is the natural continuation of feeding from umbilical cord ,when the baby was inside the mother's uterus	52	14.60
2	Breastfeeding is natural way of feeding baby	349	98.00
3	Mothers who breastfeed must be in excellent health	67	18.80
4	The breastfed baby always receives a complete food at an ideal temperature & free of bacteria	291	81.70
5	The breastfed baby receives a complete nutrition according to the baby's need	315	88.50
6	The baby fed exclusively with human milk does not need to take water or other foods during 6 months of life	261	73.30
7	The human milk protect babies against illnesses	333	93.50
8	Breastfeeding helps to the mother & baby to develop a special bonding	325	91.30
9	Mother can breastfeed & smoke	346	97.20
10	Mother can breastfeed & have an occasional drink	317	89.00
11	Mother can breastfeed & eat different foods	214	60.10
12	Mother who breastfed her baby loses weight that was gained during pregnancy faster	148	41.60
13	Breastfeeding helps the mother's uterus return more quickly to its natural size	182	51.10
14	Breastfeeding can be a natural birth control method	195	54.80
15	The mother who breastfed enjoys natural protection against breast cancer, ovarian & uterine cancer	231	64.90
16	The premature & low birth weight baby develops better if it is exclusively breastfed	285	80.10
17	The mothers can breastfeed successfully, regardless of size of her breasts	218	61.20
18	The quantity of milk produced by the mother does not depend on the size of her breast.	244	68.50
19	Twins or triplets should be exclusively breastfed	225	63.20
20	Breastfeeding should be initiated immediately after birth regardless of the type of delivery (normal or caesarian) & place of delivery.(home or hospital )	257	72.20
21	The first yellowish thick breast milk (colostrums) should be given to the baby	286	80.30
22	Breastfeeding is the only way of feeding which is hygienic, safe, effective & cost free	336	94.40
23	Exclusively breastfed babies do not suffer from diarrhoea	176	49.40
24	Breastfeeding prevents childhood obesity	207	58.10
25	Mothers with tuberculosis or HIV infection can breastfed babies	93	26.10

**Table no: 3 Level of Knowledge of students regarding Breastfeeding**

Knowledge of students regarding Breastfeeding	Low	Average	High	Total
No. Of students	21	228	107	356
Percentage	05.90	64.00	30.10	100

**Table no: 4 Level of knowledge and Sex of the student**

Level of knowledge	Sex		Total
	Female	Male	
High	94(26.4)	13(3.7)	107(30.1)
Average	171(48)	57(16)	228(64)
Low	9(2.5)	12(3.4)	21(5.9)
Total	274(77)	82(23)	356(100)

Chi square= 21.43                      p< 0.001

**Table no: 5 Level of knowledge and Religion of students**

Level of Knowledge of students	Religion		Total
	Hindu	Others	
High	80(22.5)	27(7.6)	107(30.1)
Average	174(48.9)	54(15.2)	228(64)
Low	18(5.1)	3(0.8)	21(5.9)
Total	272(76.4)	84(23.6)	356(100)

Chi square = 1.17                      p > 0.5

**Table: 6 Level of knowledge and faculty of student.**

Level of knowledge	Faculty		Total
	Medical + Nursing	Dental + Pharmacy	
High	100 (34.7)	7 (10.30)	107
Average	180 (62.5)	48 (70.60)	228
Low	008 (02.8)	13 (19.10)	021
Total	288 (100)	68 (100.00)	356

$X^2 = 36.4$        $p < 0.001$

Table no.8 shows that overall all the respondents gave appropriate response towards all the attitude statements. As per Table no 7, only 51.40% students agree that breastfeeding does not make the breasts fall. The opinion of the students about breastfeeding and sexuality is divided. They consider breastfeeding as too much time consuming (66.30%) and difficult than feeding by cup or spoon (85.10%). The most surprising thing is that they consider cow`s milk better for babies than breast milk (88.10%) and commercial formula feeds are necessary for baby`s growth.

**Table: 7 Attitude of students towards Breastfeeding**

Sr.No	Attitude of students	Positive (%)	Negative (%)
1	Breastfeeding is the only way of feeding which is hygienic, safe, effective & cost free	95.20	04.80
2	Breastfeeding gives satisfaction to the mother	96.60	03.40
3	Breastfeeding can make woman feel important	90.40	09.60
4	Breastfeeding stops mother from doing household activities	85.40	14.60
5	Breastfeeding is painful	77.20	22.80
6	Breastfeeding is embarrassing	67.70	32.30
7	It is acceptable that the mother breastfeeds in front of family & friends	34.60	65.40
8	It is okay to breastfeed in public	19.10	80.90
9	Breastfed babies have strong family bonds	82.00	18.00
10	Woman`s breast should not only be for sexual pleasure	78.70	21.30
11	Breastfeeding the baby does not make the breasts fall	51.40	48.60
12	Breastfeeding mothers look less attractive	25.80	74.20
13	Breastfeeding does not make the woman lose her interest in sexual activity	51.40	48.60
14	Breastfeeding is not an obstacle for the sexual relationships	69.40	30.60
15	Breastfeeding helps in birth spacing	76.40	23.60
16	Breastfeeding is too time consuming	66.30	33.70
17	It is easier to feed baby by spoon or cup than breast	85.10	14.90
18	Cow`s milk is better for babies than breast milk	88.80	11.20
19	Commercial formula feeds are necessary for baby`s growth	49.20	50.80
20	Colostrum is good for baby	85.40	14.60
21	It is necessary to address youth at colleges to spread awareness about breastfeeding	95.50	04.50

Positive: Indicates positive attitude of student towards that specific question.  
 Negative: Indicates negative attitude of student towards that specific question

**Table no: 8 Attitude of students towards breastfeeding.**

Attitude	Frequency	Percentage
Positive	346	97.20
Negative	10	02.80
Total	356	100.00

Positive = score > 63  
 Negative = score ≤ 63

## DISCUSSION

The study aimed to assess knowledge of college students regarding breastfeeding practices.

Though students are from medical and allied branches majority of student`s (64%) level

of knowledge about breastfeeding was average. A study in Taiwan on physicians, nurses, medical students and student nurses showed low knowledge about breastfeeding though they had positive attitude towards it. [13] Similar observations were found in other studies also. [14, 10]

60 to 70% students gave correct responses to various questions on general knowledge (knowledge about breastfeeding which even lay person knows). Majority of students (81.20%) consider that mother

should be in excellent health to breastfeed the baby. Mother who is ill can also breastfeed baby and is not a barrier.

It is observed that most of students knew about the benefits of breastfeeding to baby and cost effectiveness of breastfeeding. But only approximately half of the students know that breastfeeding prevents diarrhoea and childhood obesity.

Only 41 to 65% students gave correct answers to various questions related to benefits of breastfeeding to mother. The role of breastfeeding in uterine involution after delivery was known to only 51.10% students. Over 60% of the participants were unaware that breastfeeding helps to lose mother's weight.

Consistent Breastfeeding retards the return of fertility, providing up to 98% protection against pregnancy during the first 6 months postpartum, as long as the mother remains amenorrhoea breastfeeds in an exclusive or almost exclusive manner. [15]

Only 54.80% students were aware that breastfeeding is the natural birth control method. A study in Ziauddin University Karachi, Pakistan also showed similar result. [16]

A couple of studies have evaluated maternal knowledge regarding advantages of breastfeeding. Study from Bolivia showed that 92.6% mothers mentioned at least one advantage, [17] whereas a study from Vietnam revealed insufficient knowledge of mothers. [18] A study in Puerto Rican also showed that 88.8% male parents presented a low level of knowledge about breastfeeding. [19]

Certain special situations related to breastfeeding practices were inquired from the students. It is observed that knowledge of students about breastfeeding in special situation is poor. Amal J Khoury et al. Also found similar type of results in WIC clinic staff, Mississippi. [20]

As alcohol and smoking are bad habits, majority of students have said that breastfeeding mother cannot smoke or cannot have an occasional drink. Though smoking affects on production of breast milk and may make child more prone to respiratory infections and asthma, smoking and an occasional drink should not prevent baby to be breastfed.

Though the outcome of delivery is twin or triplet, newborns should be exclusively breastfed. On questions related to breastfeeding in special situation, such as mother with tuberculosis or HIV infection can breastfeed baby, the correct response was very less.

The association between the level of knowledge on breastfeeding and sociodemographic profile was studied. It showed statistically significant association between level of knowledge and being female. It also showed statistically significant association between level of knowledge on breastfeeding and faculty of the student (Medical + Nursing). This association may be due to the fact that breastfeeding is part of the curriculum syllabus of Medical and Nursing students. It did not show any association between religion of the student and level of knowledge on breastfeeding.

In the present study, majority of students showed positive attitude towards breastfeeding. Similar results were observed in a study done among Malaysian students [21] and Pakistani students. [16]

The attitude of students regarding breastfeeding was that it is painful, embarrassing. They also feel that woman should not breastfeed in front of family, relatives, and friends and also in public. Similar observations were found in a study in Puerto Rican male parents. [19]

This attitude is evidence of the sexual value of the breasts for the participants of the study. Sexualisation of



breast has had such deep implications, that breastfeeding has been given an image of sexual activity and, as such should be carried out in private. There are many women who choose to not breastfeed in public because they feel embarrassed and uncomfortable in doing so.

The attitude of students about breastfeeding as too much time consuming, difficult than feeding by cup or spoon and considering cow's milk better for babies than breast milk and commercial formula feeds as necessary for baby's growth, needs prompt attention.

## CONCLUSIONS

The student's knowledge on breastfeeding was inadequate. The students were aware about the benefits of breastfeeding to baby but majority of them could not give correct responses to questions related to advantages of breastfeeding to mother and breastfeeding in special situations. A majority of students showed positive attitude towards breastfeeding. Their attitudes towards sexuality and breastfeeding turned out to be negative.

Modernisation has resulted in social, cultural and economical changes. There has been increased extensive opportunities of employment among women, lack of information and support for the mothers, introduction of commercial baby foods and feeding bottles and also promotion of infant foods has been more extensive than spreading knowledge on breastfeeding. In addition to this, if the medical and allied faculty students are not prepared to overcome these barriers of breastfeeding by educating and training them, it will further decline the breastfeeding rates. The overall main source of information on breastfeeding for students is syllabus contents. The commonly read books are inadequate on this issue; there is need for greater emphasis on this in books and training sessions.

As a part of this project, the teachers and other faculty members will also be sensitized to educate and train the upcoming batches of students. So that it will remain a continuous programme without outside help. The comprehensive and integrated training programmes on breastfeeding will be conducted in the college to inculcate high knowledge and positive attitudes.

Every year, "World Breastfeeding Week" will be celebrated in medical & other colleges. The week will be celebrated by conducting various activities such as quiz, essay competition, poster exhibition etc.

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