

THE IMPORTANCE OF EXCLUSIVE BREASTFEEDING FOR INFANT HEALTH

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Abstract:

Exclusive breastfeeding is a natural and biological function through which the mother provides the ideal nutrition for her infant during the first months of its life. The child's relationship with the breast is an extension of its relationship with the umbilical cord, and throughout the different stages of human life, breastfeeding has been the vital method of nourishing the infant, as it is the only possibility for its survival. For this reason, it is recommended that the infant be exclusively breastfed in the first hours after birth in order to receive colostrum, which is rich in nutrients and antibodies that provide the infant with acquired immunity against most diseases. The practice of breastfeeding is not only a biological act, but also a behaviour with psychological, social and cultural dimensions and determinants. The aim of this article is to highlight the importance of exclusive breastfeeding as a characteristic for the maintenance of infant health, given the benefits and advantages it contains.

Keywords: Exclusive breastfeeding, infant health, importance, benefits.

Introduction:

Breastfeeding is a global phenomenon that exists in all cultures. Awareness of its importance and the reduction in the use of formula milk has increased over the last two decades. Breastfeeding should begin within the first hour of a newborn's life and the most important aspect is the feeding of first milk (colostrum), which the World Health Organisation (WHO) recommends as the best nutrition for a newborn. Exclusive breastfeeding is the ideal way to provide the best nutrition for the first six months of a newborn's life, benefiting children around the world. The WHO also emphasises that nutrition in the first three years of life determines health throughout life. Breastfeeding is considered the most precious gift to a child, but only one in three children has the opportunity to be exclusively breastfed for at least six months,

while two-thirds of infants are deprived of this right. Breastfeeding is therefore the natural way to provide an infant with the essential and balanced nutrients for growth through mother's milk.

1- Definition of terms:

1-1 Definition of breastfeeding:

It is the process of feeding a newborn baby with milk produced by the female breast through sucking. It is a natural process shared by humans and other mammals and lasts from birth to weaning¹.

1-2 Exclusive (Predominant) Breastfeeding: This is when the infant is fed only breast milk and does not consume any other liquids, including water, or solid foods, except for oral rehydration solutions, vitamin/mineral drops or medicines.

1-3 Artificial feeding: This means relying entirely on manufactured animal milk and abstaining from breast milk².

1-4 Mixed feeding: It is feeding the baby by combining breastfeeding and artificial feeding³.

It is the period after childbirth during which a woman breast-feeds her child, thereby slightly reducing the chances of pregnancy for the breastfeeding woman⁴.

Breastfeeding delays the return of a woman's menstrual period and delays ovulation after childbirth, which reduces the risk of pregnancy for the breastfeeding woman⁵.

¹- Othman Tartoosh, The Reality of Exclusive Breastfeeding in Algeria (A Field Study in the Public Hospital, Qasr al-Shalala-Tiaret), Master's Thesis in Sociology and Demography, Department of Sociology and Demography, Abu al-Qasim Saadallah University, 2015-2016, p. 5.

²- Nabila Mcheyd, Reasons for the Decline in Breastfeeding (A Field Study on a Sample of Women in the Zeralda Health Sector), Master's Thesis in Sociology and Demography, University of Algiers 2, 2003-2004, p. 20.

³- Othman Tartoosh, cited above, p. 5.

⁴- Souleiman Al-Hassania, Family Planning: Thought, Reality and Aspirations*, Ministry of Culture, Damascus, 1998, p. 48.

⁵- Ministry of Health, Birth Spacing, March 1985, pp. 14-15.

In all cases, breast milk is considered the best basis for the health and nutrition of the infant. Breastfeeding and the sucking action of the infant cause the release of certain hormones that prevent ovulation in the woman.

1-5 Infant health (infant immunity):

The infant's immunity develops during growth; the immune system is formed in the foetus during pregnancy, and the infant receives immunity from the mother through the placenta during pregnancy and through breastfeeding after birth. The infant's immune system also produces specific antibodies each time it is exposed to a virus or bacteria, but it takes time for this immunity to fully develop¹.

2- The benefits of breastfeeding:

Breast milk contains antibodies that protect the infant from infection, but if the infant is fed formula, there is a high chance of exposure to illness and diarrhoea (and gastroenteritis, which can be very serious), ear, chest and urinary tract infections. A mother's breastfeeding of her newborn baby is beneficial for the baby's growth, and research shows that children who have been breastfed have better mental development. Formula-fed babies are more likely to develop allergies (eczema), diabetes and high blood pressure than breastfed babies. Breastfeeding is also good for mothers, helping them to lose the weight they gained during pregnancy, protecting them from breast and ovarian cancer, and strengthening their bones¹

The health benefits of breastfeeding are numerous for both mother and child, and the most important benefits for the child are:

-Provides optimal nutrition; as breast milk contains everything the infant needs during the first six months of life, when the composition of the milk changes according to the infant's changing needs.

¹ [Ministry of Health of Saudi Arabia, Health Awareness](<https://www.moh.gov.sa/HealthAwareness/EducationalContent/BabyHealth/Pages/014.aspx22>), Baby Health.
www.psychologyandeducation.net

- Helping to fight viruses and bacteria, as breast milk contains antibodies.
- Reduces the risk of diseases such as middle ear infections, respiratory infections, colds, intestinal infections, sudden infant death syndrome, digestive disorders, diabetes and leukaemia.
- Maintaining a healthy weight and preventing obesity in later childhood.
- Making the child more intelligent, which can be attributed to the physical and visual contact between mother and child.
- Significant positive long-term effects on brain development.

The main benefits of breastfeeding for the mother are

- Helps to lose extra weight easily.
- Helping the uterus to contract and return to its normal size.
- Reduced risk of depression due to hormonal changes and increased levels of oxytocin.
- Reduces the risk of diseases such as breast and ovarian cancer.
- Can stop ovulation and menstruation, making breastfeeding an effective method of family planning.
- Saves time and money by eliminating the need for formula and the time spent cleaning and sterilising bottles .

3- The importance of breastfeeding:

The World Health Organisation (WHO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) have stated that one and a half million children worldwide die each year as a result of not being breastfed by their mothers, and that most of these deaths are caused by feeding children artificial milk from bottles, as proper sterilisation is often

not carried out. In addition, more than nine million children suffer from severe malnutrition because the milk is often overly diluted with water, leading to various diseases and early death. Artificial milk will therefore never be able to match the benefits of breastmilk, even if it is formulated to be identical, as it cannot replicate the psychological, emotional, hormonal and structural changes that occur during natural breastfeeding¹.

3-1 The Importance of Breastfeeding from an Islamic Perspective

Islam has paid great attention to the child before and after birth, preserving her right to financial support during pregnancy and childhood. The Qur'an states: "And if they should be pregnant, then spend on them until they give birth." (Quran 65:6) There is also an emphasis on caring for the psychology of the mother during pregnancy, as the Quran states: "Lodge them [in a section] where you dwell out of your means, and do not harm them to oppress them". (Quran 65:6)

The child has the right to be breastfed by its mother. Allah the Exalted says: "And the [nursing] mothers may nurse their children for two full years, for whoever wishes to complete the nursing [period]" (Qur'an 2:233). (Quran 2:233) There is nothing more beneficial to the child than its mother's milk. It is well known that a mother's breastfeeding, combined with her affection, tenderness and the warmth of her embrace, provides an emotional nourishment that the child needs as much as food and drink. The total duration of pregnancy and breastfeeding is thirty months, with two years being the full breastfeeding period.

Islam has also paid special attention to this practice. This complex process is a tangible physiological bond between the child and the mother, with a number of benefits. Breast milk is easily digestible by the child and protects it from various diseases. It also helps the uterus return to its original state quickly. Because of the importance of mother's milk for the child, Allah the Almighty has urged mothers to breastfeed their children. If they are unable to do so, it is recommended that they be

¹- Othman Tartoush, reference cited above, p. 23.
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breastfed by another woman, as the Quran states: “Leave them [in a section] where you dwell out of your means, and do not harm them to oppress them. And if they are pregnant, spend on them until they give birth. And if they give suck for you, then give them their due, and adjudicate between yourselves in a lawful manner. And if you disagree, let another woman give suck to him [the father]”. (Quran 65:6) A mother’s milk can only be replaced with milk of the same kind. Artificial feeding should only be used in cases of necessity, such as pregnancy or dryness of the breasts¹.

3-2 The psychological significance of breastfeeding:

Many people believe that breastfeeding is merely a physical nourishment of the baby with liquid milk, and this is the mistake made by materialistic psychologists. It has been said in criminal psychology that sucking is a process of absorption which is subject to the laws of learning, in the sense that it is the enjoyment of a warm liquid, and this statement may be true in the advanced stages of breastfeeding, that is, after the child has practised breastfeeding for a period during which it learns absorption and associates it with swallowing, and enjoys the arrival of this warm liquid in its stomach. However, in the first experiments of breastfeeding, the matter is done as one of the innate data or a given primary act (instinct). The newborn, who depends on the umbilical cord for nourishment in the womb, has also started sucking with the mouth before birth, where he sucks his finger while still in the womb.

Therefore, the interest of psychologists in breastfeeding stems mainly from their interest in the child and its mental health, as they always focus on the close bond that is created between the infant and its mother through this practice, where the infant, when in its mother’s arms, sucks her breasts and feels reassurance and comfort. This is why psychologists call breastfeeding “spiritual nourishment”, because in addition to the physiological benefits discovered by modern medicine, breast milk is nourishment for the soul and spirit of the suckling infant. Breastfeeding is not just a nutritional act, but a gift from God Almighty and a blessing for mothers to meet the

¹- Nabila Mchid, see above, p. 77.

physiological and psychological needs of their suckling infants. In addition, the mother's success in this practice strengthens her self-confidence and makes her feel maternal.

Breastfeeding is also highly complex at the level of the psychological dimension of this unique experience for the breastfeeding mother and her suckling infant. It is a relational situation in which many psychological and metapsychological elements intertwine and overlap, which have been studied within the analytical view of the subject of breastfeeding, considering that through breastfeeding the mother passes not only her milk to the child, but also her desires, fantasies and defences¹.

The key point here is that the child initially breastfeeds in order to obtain food, which provides the caloric units necessary for its survival and continued existence. However, the child soon discovers, during his or her early breastfeeding experiences, a series of successive pleasures that accompany the act of breastfeeding, including but not limited to: the sensation of the mother's warmth, hearing her voice, smelling her scent, physical contact with her, and the feeling of being enveloped and protected by her².

3-3 The social significance of breastfeeding:

Breastfeeding is the only way to nourish a child in the early stages of life, and this nourishment is essential for the child's life and continued growth. Even after spending nine months in the womb, which has allowed the child to develop as a living being, the child is still unable to take care of his or her own needs and remains dependent on the mother. Some researchers have even considered this helpless and weak creature as not yet fully civilised. The mother produces milk from her breasts and breast-feeds her child; she also cares for it and nurtures it socially. Without the nursing mother, there is no true humanity. The nursing mother gives not only her milk but also her time and her body to nourish the child and mould it into a true human

¹- Warda Makhlof, Hussein Fesyhan, Some Psychological and Cultural Determinants of Breastfeeding Practice Among Mothers, *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, No. 31, December 2017, University of Oran 2, Algeria, p. 246.

²- *Ibid.*, pp. 246-247.

being. The milk in turn nourishes the child and facilitates its integration into the human collective. Thus, the quality of humanity and the occurrence of social integration depend on the behaviour of breastfeeding. There is nothing more beneficial to the child than its mother's milk, and it is well known that a mother's breastfeeding¹ is imbued with her affection, tenderness and the warmth of her embrace - an emotional nourishment that the child needs as much as food and drink.

4- Research on the benefits of breastfeeding:

4-1 Breastfeeding and mental development:

Several studies conducted in the United States have shown a strong correlation between a child's intelligence/cognitive ability and the duration of breast-feeding. Children who were breastfed for eight months or more scored 6-8 points higher on various intelligence tests than those who were formula-fed. In a study of 3,253 men and women in Copenhagen, Norway, published in 2002 in the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA), those who were breastfed for less than one month scored 99.4 on the intelligence scale, while those who were breastfed for more than nine months scored 104. Researchers in the UK found the same result in a study of 300 children.

In a study published in 2002, researchers found that children born with a lower-than-average weight were more affected by the quality of their milk. Those who were breastfed for the first six months of life scored 11 points higher on the intelligence scale than their peers who were given formula milk during the same period.

4-2 Breastfeeding and immunity:

Breast milk is superior to formula milk because it is a medicine as well as food. Colostrum (the milk secreted by the mother's breast immediately after childbirth and which continues for 3-8 days) is vital for the child's life and immunity to disease. It contains a high percentage of antibodies (immunoglobulins) A and G, which are

¹- Ibid., p. 252.

necessary to resist various types of bacteria and some viruses such as polio and measles. They also protect the baby against nasal, ear, throat and gastrointestinal infections. Breast milk also contains immune proteins such as interferon (anti-viral), lactoferrin and lysozyme, and a large group of white blood cells such as B-lymphocytes, granulocytes and phagocytes, with one teaspoon of breast milk containing 3 million immune cells. Formula milk, on the other hand, is completely devoid of antibodies, cells and immune proteins.

Researchers have also observed a very weak immune response to vaccines in children who are not breastfed, 500 times less than their breastfed peers.

4-3 Breastfeeding and infectious diseases:

Breast milk contains colostrum, which contains massive amounts of antibodies and substances that are resistant to viruses and bacteria. These secretions resist many types of bacteria, such as cholera and coliform bacteria, and kill many viruses, such as polio, coxsackie and herpes viruses.

Infants fed formula milk suffer more from respiratory illness. Statistics from hospitals in the United States show that the number of respiratory illnesses in formula-fed babies is three times higher than in breastfed babies. Failure to provide breastmilk to infants accounts for 8% of hospital admissions for children with respiratory illnesses¹.

On the other hand, an increased incidence of gastrointestinal illness is associated with the distance from breast milk. The incidence of diarrhoea in formula-fed infants is twice that of breastfed infants in Canada and three times that in China. Conversely, the incidence of necrotising enterocolitis in formula-fed infants is 6-10 times higher than in breastfed infants. Other studies have confirmed the reality of a sharp increase in acute infection of this disease in formula-fed infants.

¹- Othman Tartoush, cited above, pp. 24-25.
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As for otitis media, breastfeeding for 6 months reduced the incidence of ear infections by 40%. The rate of ear infections in formula-fed babies was 80% higher than in breastfed babies.

4-4 Breastfeeding and allergic diseases:

Numerous studies have confirmed a significant increase in allergic diseases in children who consume artificial milk compared to their counterparts who rely on natural milk. Children who consume cow's milk suffer from digestive allergies at a rate of 50-60%, respiratory allergies and asthma at a rate of 30% and high rates of skin eczema, which can reach 70%. The proteins in cow's milk cause a range of allergic diseases in children, including asthma, eczema, gastritis and enteritis².

4-5 Cancer:

A study conducted in Moscow, Russia, showed that the rate of cancer in children who were breastfed for less than one month was 7 times higher than in those who were breastfed for 6 months or more. Davis and his colleagues mentioned that the incidence of cancer of the lymphatic system was 8 times higher in those who breastfed for less than 6 months. The researchers even found that women who were formula-fed in childhood were 25% more likely to develop breast cancer than their breast-fed counterparts.

4-6 Diabetes:

Breastfeeding protects against a dangerous group of diseases, including type 1 diabetes, which affects children at an early age. Mayer and other researchers have shown that breastfeeding reduces the spread of this dangerous disease in children by 25-50% because the proteins in cow's milk stimulate the infant's immune system to produce antibodies that attack and destroy the pancreas.

4-7 Other diseases:

Breast milk protects the infant from a wide range of diseases in addition to those mentioned above. These include: celiac disease, which affects the digestive system and causes abdominal pain due to the stomach's inability to digest the gluten protein found in wheat; atherosclerosis; childhood hypertension; certain types of cancer; rickets; constipation or diarrhoea; dental deformities and malformations; meningitis; urinary tract infections; Crohn's disease; and many others.

On the other hand, breastfeeding significantly reduces the impact of many serious genetic diseases in children, such as cystic fibrosis, phenylketonuria and hereditary zinc deficiency. All of these diseases occur in a much milder form in those who are breastfed by their mothers than in those who are fed artificially¹.

4-8 Breastfeeding and Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS):

Sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS), an unexplained cause of death, is more common in formula-fed infants than in breastfed infants. 23 Studies have shown that the risk of SIDS is 50% lower in breastfed infants than in formula-fed infants. Researchers have calculated the number of deaths that could occur in formula-fed and breastfed infants in the United States and estimate that 38,335 deaths could occur annually in the former group compared to 18,660 in the latter. This suggests that breastfeeding can prevent 18,670 infant deaths in the United States.

4-9 Breast milk and infant mental health:

The psychological development of breastfed infants is healthier and faster than that of formula-fed infants. Research has confirmed that the act of breastfeeding, along with the physical contact and nurturing it provides, has a significant impact on an infant's present and future behaviour. Without it, babies become more nervous, aggressive and difficult to handle. In addition, rates of juvenile delinquency, behavioural disorders, substance abuse and juvenile crime are associated to some extent with lack of breastfeeding and reliance on formula feeding.

The information provided clearly demonstrates the importance of breastmilk as a superior source of nutrition for infants, especially during the critical first few months of life when the infant's brain, immune system and dental development are undergoing rapid growth and require the specific components found in breastmilk to support healthy development at all stages of growth².

Conclusion:

¹- Ibid, pp. 26-27.

²- Ibid, p. 28.

The family is the social institution responsible for feeding and caring for its members, especially children, who require quality nutrition during their growth. There has been a significant increase in research into infant nutrition and these studies have helped to increase our knowledge of the nature of its components and their nutritional value for the infant. However, the majority of this research concludes that, despite the enormous advances in the manufacture of milk and special foods for children, breast milk remains the best that can be given to the child, being richer in composition and more suitable for the infant. It also provides immunity against many childhood diseases, especially diarrhoea, which is the leading cause of child mortality in developing countries.

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