

Current trends in infant feeding in Saudi society

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Summary

Infant feeding practices were studied in 4796 randomly selected Saudi infants whose mothers were interviewed at their homes. They were fed with breast milk plus bottle complements. Of the infants, 82.7 per cent were exclusively breast fed in only the first month of life.

The overall results suggest a decreasing incidence of breast feeding along with a diminishing length of the nursing period.

INTRODUCTION

INFANT feeding habits in a community are constantly changing. Despite the considerable advantages of mothers milk, (Baum, 1971; Abdulla and Sebai, 1982) breast feeding rates have declined (Haque, 1983).

The current infant feeding practices among a representative sample of Saudi mothers living in Riyadh were investigated.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study consisted of a community field survey using a structured questionnaire. The number of families selected at random, and enrolled in the study was 4796.

Trained health visitors were assigned at random to interview the families. Each mother was asked whether her child had been or was still being fed breast milk alone, breast milk plus formula, or formula alone. The mothers sampled were also asked about the duration of breast feeding, when formula was first introduced, and when solid food was first given. Information about mother's age and educational level, and the age and sex of her baby was also collected.

The questionnaires were processed by computer using the SPSS program for statistical analysis. Details of sampling design and sampling procedures have been published elsewhere (Al-Frayh *et al.*, 1988).

RESULTS

Out of the 4796 infants entered in the study, 49.9 per cent were boys and 50.1 per cent were girls. Of the mothers sampled there were 20.5 per cent less than 20 years of age, 56.6 per cent between 20 and 30 years, 11.5 per cent and 31-35 years and 7.5 per cent 36 years or above. There was no relationship between maternal age and pattern of feeding. Analysis of the educational level of the mothers revealed that 70 per cent had only basic education in reading and writing (elementary school) and 30 per cent had completed secondary school or a higher education. Of those who had basic education, 32 per cent breast fed their babies exclusively. In contrast 70 per cent of the mothers with higher education gave bottle and breast milk (Table). Bottle feeding was started in 27.3 per cent of babies within 1 month, and the average age at which infants were given solid food was 3.45 months.

DISCUSSION

In a rapidly changing society like Saudi Arabia, it is hard to remain untouched by the pace of development. The average Saudi mother is no exception, and though traditionally a breast feeder, she and her Arab sisters are turning towards the bottle.

Although we did not find a statistically significant relationship between maternal age and breast feeding in this study, there was a negative correlation between level of education and breast feeding. The higher the educational level of the mother, the less likely she was to breast feed her infant. This is contrary to the finding by Haque (1983) in a hospital based study.

Of the sampled mothers 77.1 per cent were aged 30 years or less. These are the mothers who have benefited from the rapid development in education in Saudi Arabia. The General Directorate of Girls Education should put more emphasis on the

Table. Maternal age, educational level and infant feeding practice (total sample $n = 4796$)

Age and educational level of the mother	(% of sample)	Breast fed (%)	Bottle fed (%)	Breast and bottle (%)
Age (years)				
≤20	(20.5%)	25.0	11.1	63.9
21-25	(36.3%)	25.7	8.8	65.5
26-30	(24.2%)	29.7	9.1	61.2
31-35	(11.5%)	26.2	11.0	62.4
≥36	(7.5%)	31.5	14.0	54.5
Educational level				
Basic education	(69.7%)	28.6	9.2	62.2
Completed intermediate	(12.3%)	27.3	9.6	63.1
Completed secondary and higher	(18.0%)	19.9	12.1	68.0

importance of breast feeding in the curriculum, particularly in the intermediate and secondary school level.

Haque (1983) found that only 10.4 per cent of mothers received antenatal advice about infant feeding, although 64 per cent of them had attended an antenatal clinic at least once during their pregnancy. It seems a pity that such a golden opportunity is being missed, and it is recommended that this should be urgently reviewed. All mothers would welcome advice about infant feeding and care. Rahman *et al.* (1982) have reported from the Eastern Province of the Kingdom that 19 per cent of mothers stopped breast feeding either to go on oral contraceptives or because of having to return to work. This was not our experience in Riyadh. Abdulla and Sebai (1982) have found that the average age of stopping breast feeding in rural areas is 12.5 months and 11 per cent of mothers continued to breast feed for more than 2 years, whilst their urban sisters in our study envisaged feeding their infants for an average of 4 months.

Great efforts should be made to promote breast feeding, this should start in the schools as an integrated part of the curriculum; obstetricians should make use of antenatal clinics to reinforce

the desire to breast feed, and paediatricians should make every effort to teach correct methods of infant feeding and care.

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