

Breast Feeding, Islamic Guidance and Scientific Evidence

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Islamic guidance

Breast feeding by the mother to her new born infant is greatly beneficial. It is prescribed as Almighty commanded the mother to breast feed her child for two years: "The mothers shall give such to their offspring for two whole years" if the father desires to complete the term. But he shall bear the cost of their food and clothing on equal length of period accordingly. If they both decide on weaning, by mutual understanding after due consultation, there is no blame on them. Directives also appear in the Noble Quran: If ye decide on a foster-mother for your offspring, there is no blame on you, provided ye pay (the mother) what ye offered, on equitable terms. But fear God and know that God sees well what ye do. (The Noble Quran, 2:233)"

Scientific fact

There are numerous scientific facts about the importance of breastfeeding such as:

1. Human breast milk is uniquely composed to meet the needs of human infants:
2. It has a high concentration of lactose (milk sugar). This is an excellent source of carbohydrates - pivotal energy provider.
3. The proteins (largely whey proteins) - building blocks - are much more easily digestible than the proteins in formula based on cow's milk (Lawerence, 1999).
4. Infants who are fed human milk tend to have stools that are less foul smelling and softer than those of infants who are fed cow's milk or soymilk or others.

In addition, some selected advantages of breast feeding are delineated for comprehensibility of the importance of breast feeding:

Bonding and Psychosocial effects

Bonding is the emotional tie from parents to infants (Kennell, 1998). It begins during pregnancy and increases with birth. This attachment enables parents to make sacrifices for their infants. Many women express that their breastfeeding experiences were very special times during their reproductive periods and they valued highly that closeness to their infants. If a woman is unable to breastfeed her infant she needs to be reassured that she will still be able to bond with her infant. A recent small study in Boston evaluated the behavioral effects of a heel prick procedure (for drawing newborn genetic screening) when mothers were breastfeeding their infants compared to a control group of infants who were swaddled in a bassinet. All infants in the experimental group were latched onto their mother's breast lying skin to skin before the heel prick. Video monitoring of both groups revealed the the infants breastfed during the procedure had crying and grimacing reduced by 91% and 84% respectively compared to the infants who underwent the procedure in their bassinet. Breastfeeding also prevented the tachycardia associated with the procedure in the control group (Gray, 2002).

Intellectual development

Since 1929, many studies have examined the effects of breast feeding on the cognitive development of children. Most of these studies have shown a statistically significant increase in developmental test scores from 2% to 5% for breast-fed children when compared against formula based milk fed children.

Health risk reduction

Breastfeeding provides protective factors which may help reduce infections, such as diarrhea and ear infections. Breastfeeding may reduce the risk of allergic conditions, including asthma.

Breasts will provide milk in adequate quantity and quality as long as milk is removed from the breast. Breastfeeding is ideal for travel. It is always available and at the right temperature. Breastfeeding avoids the dangers of artificial milk such as: unsafe water, improper storage, etc. For generations all over the world, mothers with all varieties of diet have been breastfeeding. A mother's milk continues to contain adequate amounts of nutrients even if her diet is less than ideal. Her milk is still best for baby. However, the mother will feel the effects of eating poorly; her resistance to disease may go down, she may have less energy, and she may feel less able to cope. For her own sake, it is wise for her to eat a healthy diet. Most mothers can eat any food they like without it causing any problem for their babies. Even so, many mothers restrict their diets unnecessarily because they have been told they should avoid cabbage, chocolates, spicy foods, peas, onions and cauliflower because these foods are thought to cause their babies colic, gas, diarrhea, and rashes with breastfeeding.

A mother varied diet may be an advantage to her breastfeeding baby because it alters the flavour of her milk, providing baby with a variety of tastes which prepares baby for the solid foods baby will receive at the family table after 6 months of age. Breastfeeding mothers who eat whenever they feel hungry tend to lose weight gradually. On average, breastfeeding women who eat when hungry lose weight at the rate of 0.6 to 0.8kg (1.3 to 1.6 pounds) per month in the first 4-6 months of breastfeeding. Extra pounds are added during pregnancy to store energy for producing milk; breastfeeding makes it easier to shed these extra pounds. It is important to lose weight slowly. During the first two months postpartum the mother's body needs to recover from childbirth and establish a good milk supply. Dieting is not recommended during this period.

Evidence based example

Shorter periods of breast-feeding leads to malnutrition at an early age among children living in Indian slums, according to the results of a study conducted in Pune, a rapidly growing city in India. 'Slum populations living in adverse conditions represent nutritionally vulnerable groups that need immediate attention,' (Dr. Shobha Rao and colleagues, 1992). Over a 2-year period, Rao and her team, from the Agharkar Research Institute, Pune, studied changes in diet and illness in 845 preschool children in three Pune slums. The average duration of exclusive breast-feeding was 3.5 months, a significantly shorter period than in rural areas, the investigators found. The weights and heights of the slum children were satisfactory only up to the age of 4 months, and fell significantly below the standard levels by 6 months of age.

During infancy, 22% of children were underweight and by 5 years of age more than 40% were underweight. Children were most likely to be malnourished at around 18 months of age. Rao's group suggests that under nutrition after 4 months of age is probably attributable to the short duration of exclusive breast-feeding and lack of appropriate supplementary weaning foods. The other researchers also observed that rates of illness were higher in the youngest and least well-nourished children. Also, lack of proper nutrient intake stunted the growth of the children, causing them to only reach heights 10 centimeters lower than standard values by 5 years of age, Rao and colleagues note. 'This highlights the importance of early life under nutrition, which may be responsible for shorter adult size in poor communities of India,' the team writes.

Conclusion

Breast feeding has been proven to be extremely important to the infant's in terms of body growth, intellectual development and enhancement of psychosocial bonding. In addition to scientific evidences, the Noble Verse 2:233, as mentioned earlier, testifies the divinity and usefulness of breast feeding. In fact, if we follow the commandments of Almighty that appear in the Noble Quran, we shall prosper here and have peaceful life hereafter.

References

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