



ISSN: 2319-6505

Available Online at <http://journalijcar.org>

International Journal of Current Advanced Research
Vol 5, Issue 10, pp 1397-1399, October 2016

International Journal
of Current Advanced
Research

ISSN: 2319 - 6475

RESEARCH ARTICLE

EXPRESSING BREAST MILK: CONSTRAINTS AMONG WORKING LACTATING MOTHERS IN
NAIROBI, KENYA

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received 14th July, 2016

Received in revised form 7th August, 2016

Accepted 19th September, 2016

Published online 28th October, 2016

Key words:

Expressing breast milk, lactating mothers,
constraints

ABSTRACT

Expressing breast milk is one of the recommended approaches for working mothers. However, its adoption has been low. This study aimed to establish the constraints of expressing breast milk among lactating mothers. A cross-sectional study design was adopted on a comprehensive sample of 85 working lactating mothers in Nairobi County, Kenya. Most of the working mothers (67.1%) had a maternity leave of three months. Only 18.9% expressed breast milk, citing they understood its importance. Of these only 7.1% had breast pumps while 11.8% were hand expressing. The main reasons to this were; lack of knowledge on importance of breast feeding (12.2%), lack of knowledge on how to express (20.1%), lack of breast pumps and fridge (13.1%), lack of time to express (9.6%), poor perception of the community on the practice (8.3%), fear of contamination (7.9%) and suspicion that the house helps/caretakers will not feed the child with the expressed milk (7.0%). The study concludes that most working mothers do not express milk due to lack of knowledge on its importance and how to express milk, availability of equipment and time. This study recommends creating more awareness on importance of expressing breast milk.

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INTRODUCTION

Breast feeding promotion is a global initiative because of its perceived benefits to the mother and infant (WHO, 2003). Breastfeeding a child for the first six months is vital for the child's survival, optimal health, growth and development (UNICEF, 2013). The percentage of exclusively breastfeeding in Kenya is 61% (KDHS, 2014). Lactating mothers in Nairobi, generally resume work after a maternity leave of three months though a majority who are casuals resume work in less than a month's time (Win, 2006). In Nairobi, only 28.4% of lactating mothers are able to carry their child with them to work with 54.4% of mothers employing house girls or other caretakers to take care of the child (Lakati et al., 2002). Expression of breast milk has been recommended as an option for working mothers as a way of sustaining exclusive breastfeeding (Kimani-Murage et al., 2011).

Breast milk expression is the squeezing of milk from breasts either by use of hand or with an efficient breast pump, so as to store it for future feeding of the baby. Feeding of the child is then done in the absence of the mother by use of a cup and spoon by another person (Win, 2006). It is recommended that a mother should do two to three pumping sessions per day each lasting 15 minutes. Expressing breast milk is a feasible intervention to ensure high level coverage of exclusive breast feeding. Expressing breast milk brings relief from the pressure that the milk subjects the mammary glands, hence reduces the risk of breast engorgement, mastitis and breast cancer. It also provides an opportunity for infants left behind

by their mothers to enjoy full benefits of breast milk. The objective of this study was to identify the constraints of expressing breast milk among working lactating mothers in Nairobi, Kenya.

METHODS

This study adopted a cross-sectional study design, to explore information from working lactating mothers. The study was done in 10 selected industries in Embakasi area, which is in the outskirts of Nairobi central business center. This is an industrial area where most residents of Nairobi work. The study targeted working lactating mothers with a child below six months. The study adopted a comprehensive sample of 85 lactating mothers in 10 selected industries in Embakasi, Nairobi County. Data was collected by use of questionnaires which consisted of both closed and open ended questions. A focus group discussions guide was used to gather more information. Data was analyzed by use of SPSS version 20.

RESULTS

The mean duration of maternity leave was 1.94 ± 0.59 months with most of the working mothers (67.1%) having a maternity leave of three months and 15.3% resuming work in less than a month's time (Table 1). Only 4.7% went with children to work place. About 18.8% expressed milk, citing they understood its importance. The rest (81.2%) stopped exclusive breastfeeding once they returned back to work. Among those who expressed, 7.1% used breast pumps while

11.8% were hand expressing. The rest (81.1%) reported that they were not expressing breast milk.

Table 1 Duration of maternity leave among lactating mothers in Nairobi, Kenya

	n (85)	%
>3 months	4	4.7
3 months	57	67.1
2 months	11	12.9
1 months	8	9.4
< 1 month	5	5.9

The main reasons for not expressing milk were; lack of knowledge on importance of breast feeding (12.2%), lack of knowledge on how to do it (20.1%), lack of breast pumps and fridge (13.1%), lack of time to express (9.6%), poor perception of the community on the practice (8.3%), fear of contamination (7.9%) and suspicion that the house helps will not feed the child with the left expressed milk (7.0%) as well as high turnover of house helps (3.0%) (Table 2). Lack of space lead the mothers to express milk in odd places such as; washrooms, store rooms, parking lots, and inside private offices. The mother who expressed the milk especially using hand expression claimed that it took them a lot of time to express adequate amount of milk to meet the child’s demand.

Table 2 Expressing method and reasons for not expressing among lactating mothers in Nairobi, Kenya

	n	%
Milk expressing method	Hand expression of milk	10 11.8
	Use of breast pump	6 7.1
Reasons for not expressing	Don’t know how to express	17 20.0
	Not aware of the benefits	11 12.9
	Lack of time to express	8 9.4
	Lack of breast pump	7 8.2
	Poor perception of the community	7 8.2
	Fear of milk contamination	7 8.2
	Fear that the milk may not be fed to child	6 7.1
	Lack of fridge to store the milk	4 4.7
	High turnover of house helps	3 3.5
	Belief that they don’t have enough milk	3 3.5

DISCUSSION

The main constrains for expressing breast milk among working mothers include; lack of time, space, equipment, storage, flexible breaks, information and workplace support, challenges related to house girls/caretakers. According to Wendy (2009) and Dowling et al. (2012), a mother requires a private space, a clean and safe environment, access to running water, a chair and a shelf for storage. Moreover, cost implications, especially buying of the equipment like a fridge and breast pumps may hinder expression of breast milk among mothers in Kenya (Godfray et al., 2010). Work related stress affect milk production, due to the long hours at work away from the baby.

Most lactating mothers are not economically able to purchase such improvised machines that simplify the process of expressing milk, as opposed to the use of hands which is deemed to be too engaging. Maintaining hygiene while expressing milk in the workplace is a challenge due to unavailability of clean hand washing facilities and expressing area. House helps turnover or not wanting to handle breast milk is a challenge faced by working mothers in Nairobi. Lack of information on how to express breast milk and why it

is important to exclusively breastfeed is another challenge faced by working mothers. A study in India indicates how low knowledge on breast milk expression lead to a low practice of expressing breast milk (Prabhu et al., 2016). Mothers lack proper procedures on how to express and store human milk.

Exclusive breast feeding is one of the efforts in Kenya, geared towards the realization of optimal nutrition. The results, however, show that this is far from being achieved. Maternal knowledge on expressing breast milk is also crucial especially to mothers who are to resume work thus leaving their babies behind. Expressing breast milk is the only way they are able to continue breastfeeding the infants. The perception of the community on the practice of expressing breast milk is poor. The suspicions of house helps/caretakers to not feed the expressed breast milk to the child was also common as breast milk is considered a body fluid and most of them would avoid even touching it. A study by Odeny (2014) show that some individuals consider expressing breast milk to be an inappropriate behaviour.

CONCLUSION

Expression of breast milk is the alternative option for promotion of exclusive breastfeeding among lactating working mothers. Despite this, most of the working mothers do not express milk. This is mainly due to lack of knowledge on importance of exclusive breast feeding and how to express milk, availability of equipment, hygiene and sanitation challenges time and the characteristics of the house helps.

RECOMMENDATION

There is need for more education awareness and campaigns on importance of EBF. Education is needed to mothers on how to express breast milk, store the milk even where refrigeration is not available. Awareness at a community level is vital to ensure fathers and grandparents are involved to help support mothers during expressing of breast milk for their infants. There should be lobbying within the labor force for provision of lactation rooms and flexible breaks for mothers at work places where they can express breast milk at certain break times to ensure steady supply of the breast milk. The development of supportive Government policies would aid to lower the cost of breast pumps or ensure they are tax free to lactating mothers so that they are able to afford them.

Acknowledgments

The study acknowledges Kenyatta University for logistical support

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