

## THE IMPORTANCE OF EXCLUSIVE BREASTFEEDING IN THE FIRST SIX MONTHS OF LIFE AND THE ROLE OF NURSING

### A IMPORTÂNCIA DA AMAMENTAÇÃO EXCLUSIVA NOS SEIS PRIMEIROS MESES DE VIDA E O PAPEL DA ENFERMAGEM

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#### **Abstract**

*Exclusive breastfeeding in the first six months of life is advocated in Brazil and in several countries. The problem of this study is: What is the importance of exclusive breastfeeding in the first 6 months of life and what is the role of nursing in this context? The general objective of this study is to describe the benefits of exclusive breastfeeding in the first 6 months of life and the role of nursing in this process. This study is an integrative literature review that brings together scientific articles published from 2010 to 2021. The role of nursing therefore involves information and guidance aimed at education and health promotion, in order to demystify ideas culturally perpetuated by sense that end up interfering negatively in the entire process involving breastfeeding.*

**Keywords:** *Breast Feeding. Nursing. Postpartum Period.*

#### **Resumo**

*A amamentação exclusiva nos seis primeiros meses de vida é defendida no Brasil e em vários países. O problema desse estudo é: Qual a importância do aleitamento materno exclusivo nos primeiros 6 meses de vida e qual o papel da enfermagem diante desse contexto? O objetivo geral desse estudo é descrever os benefícios do aleitamento materno exclusivo nos 6 primeiros meses de vida e o papel da enfermagem nesse processo. Esse estudo é uma revisão integrativa de literatura que reúne artigos científicos publicados no período de 2010 a 2021. A atuação da enfermagem passa, portanto, pela informação e orientação voltadas para a educação e promoção de saúde, no sentido de desmistificar ideias perpetuadas culturalmente pelo senso comum que acabam interferindo negativamente em todo o processo que envolve a amamentação.*

**Palavras-chave:** *Aleitamento materno. Enfermagem. Período pós-parto*

## Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO), as well as the Brazilian government, suggests Exclusive Breastfeeding (EBF) in the first 6 months of children's lives, that is, without water, juices and teas. After this interval, breastfeeding becomes a supplement to food. The worldwide mobilization to encourage breastfeeding is given, among other factors, by the reduction of infant and child mortality caused by breastfeeding. <sup>(1)</sup>

Breast milk is a very complete and balanced food for the baby, it is simple to be digested, colic is not frequent in the baby. It contributes to the construction of the child's immune system, gives the proper defense against diseases, because milk has substances that protect the baby <sup>(1)</sup>

There are many benefits of breastfeeding for the baby, as it contains vitamins, minerals, fats, sugars, proteins, all of which are suitable for the baby's body. It contains nourishing and defensive substance, which is not found in cow's milk and in any other type of milk. It is a perfect food for the baby. It is most suitable for the child's stomach. <sup>(two)</sup>

Breastfeeding is also beneficial for mothers, as physical contact between mother and child during breastfeeding strengthens affective bonds. It can also decrease the mother's metrorrhagia after childbirth and automatically the uterus returns to normal size quickly and the decrease in metrorrhagia prevents maternal anemia. <sup>(two)</sup>

Exclusive breastfeeding reduces infant mortality by preventing diseases that are common in childhood, in addition to helping to recover from illness. Children who are not exclusively breastfed have a much higher risk of dying compared to those who are exclusively breastfed. <sup>(3)</sup>

The first information on the EBF situation in Brazil comes from a survey carried out in 1986, which showed that only 3.6% of children aged between 0 and 4 months were exclusively breastfed. <sup>(4)</sup> Since then, several studies and campaigns have been proposed to encourage breastfeeding in Brazil. As a result, there was an increase in the work of health professionals to implement breastfeeding and strategies at all levels of Health Care to improve breastfeeding rates.

Given the information presented, the present study has the following research problem: what is the importance of exclusive breastfeeding in the first 6 months of life in the current Brazilian context and what is the role of nursing in this scenario?

The role of the health professional, especially nursing, is to identify and understand the entire process of breastfeeding in the sociocultural and family context and, through this understanding, to provide due care for both the mother/baby pair and their family. It is necessary to look for ways to interact with the population to inform them about the importance of adopting a healthy practice of breastfeeding and addressing all the importance of exclusive breastfeeding, explaining and clarifying how this process works. Therefore, the professional needs to be prepared to provide

effective, solidary, comprehensive and contextualized assistance that respects the knowledge and life story of each woman and that helps her overcome, demystifies fears, difficulties and insecurities in the breastfeeding process. <sup>(5)</sup>

The general objective of this study is to evaluate the importance of breastfeeding in the first 6 months of life and the role of nursing.

The specific objectives foreseen for this study are: Addressing breastfeeding and its repercussions; discuss the current scenario of breastfeeding and factors that interfere with its realization; to evaluate the role of nursing in promoting and encouraging exclusive breastfeeding.

Knowing that breastfeeding is a much debated issue and that it directly interferes with the quality of life of mothers and their children, the objective of this study was to seek what is said in the current scientific literature about the benefits and importance of exclusive breastfeeding. and how nursing works in this process.

It is believed that this research has great relevance in the current scenario, as it will contribute so that mothers and health professionals can have a broader view on the subject, deepen their knowledge and reflect on their actions, aiming at the well-being of the mother. and the baby in this important moment.

The present research is justified due to the fact that we understand exclusive breastfeeding as a subject of vital importance today. This work will contribute to the dissemination of knowledge about the importance of exclusive breastfeeding and the role of nursing. With this, it will provide both mothers and health professionals with a broader view on the subject, in order to obtain more knowledge on this issue and reflect on its practice and its benefits.

It is known that today, breastfeeding is a much discussed issue, but many lack relevant information on this subject. It is vitally important that mothers and health professionals obtain knowledge about all the benefits provided by the practice of exclusive breastfeeding. Therefore, the question is: What is the importance of exclusive breastfeeding and how can nursing collaborate in this process?

This study is an integrative literature review, characterized by the synthesis of information based on relevant studies already published on the topic in question, in order to summarize what is already known about the subject and reach a conclusion about it. This research method, which aims to synthesize the results obtained through the knowledge of a certain subject, and makes it possible to direct knowledge gaps to be filled through new studies <sup>(10)</sup>

A survey of scientific articles was carried out in the following online computerized databases: Scielo, Medline, Virtual Health Library, Lilacs.

The inclusion criteria were articles published between 2010 and 2021, using the following keywords: Breastfeeding, nursing, postpartum period. After selection, the articles will be carefully analyzed through reading in full to select the ones that best suit the topic in question.

### Theoretical Reference

Pregnancy is considered an event that represents a change in roles for women in society, generating contradictory feelings. Given this, pregnancy can cause fears, insecurities and fears, and at the same time generate feelings of joy, fulfillment, satisfaction and contentment. These feelings in the face of pregnancy can be seen with greater intensity in primiparous women and are related to their sociocultural reality, interpersonal and family relationships and economic situation, and may even interfere with the bond with the baby, and later, in the breastfeeding process. maternal. <sup>(6)</sup>

Breastfeeding or Breastfeeding (BF) means breastfeeding and nourishing the child with the milk it produces, and is seen as a natural behavior. However, it can be based on learning, experience, observation and examples experienced by women, being linked to social and cultural determinants. <sup>(7)</sup>

It is recommended that breastfeeding should start in the first two hours of life, still in the delivery room, if the mother and newborn are in good health. This will favor contact between them and the beginning of effective suction of breast milk, influencing the longer duration of breastfeeding and causing long-term positive effects on mother-infant interaction, such as the fact that the child becomes more sociable. <sup>(8)</sup>

The approximation between mother and child is encouraged and recommended by the WHO, as the benefits of this approximation are numerous. It can increase the duration of breastfeeding, taking into account the fact that in the first hour of life the baby remains in a state of alert. Thus, they learn to suck more efficiently, create a bond with the mother, are warmed and receive colostrum that serves as the child's first immunization, promoting better results in their development. <sup>(9)</sup>

Early contact between mother and baby should be valued because it achieves several goals, including the human being's ability to love that occurs soon after birth, which is pointed out as a short period that brings long-term benefits. The first contact is very important for the woman, as it will be marked throughout her life, where her breastfeeding practice will be highlighted, and should be carried out in a way that generates positive experiences. <sup>(9)</sup>

Human milk is composed of several nutrients in exact amounts that allow the development of the human brain, unlike the milk produced by other mammals and often used to feed the newborn. In addition to providing a great nutritional contribution, it also exerts action on the baby's immunity. Lactation goes through three distinct periods, known as: colostrum, transitional milk and mature milk. Colostrum refers to the first secretion of the mammary glands. This stage occurs during the first week after delivery, with a volume ranging from 2 to 20 ml per feed for the first three days. Transition milk comes in the second postpartum week, acts as a link between colostrum and mature milk, which takes place from the second fortnight postpartum. <sup>(10)</sup>

The recommended time for Exclusive Breastfeeding (EBF) is six months, which can be extended up to two years along with other foods. <sup>(11)</sup>

The advantages of breastfeeding are many for both the mother and the newborn, both in the short and long term. It is very rare for the baby not to adapt to the

food. Among the numerous benefits of adequate breastfeeding, the following stand out: The prevention of gastrointestinal, respiratory and urinary infections; it also has a protective effect on allergies especially on cow's milk proteins, giving a better acceptance to other foods; long term: prevents diabetes and lymphomas. For the mother, it promotes early uterine involution, in some cases it protects against a new pregnancy and thus favors a lower probability of developing breast cancer, among others. Breast milk is considered the cheapest and safest way to feed the baby, but it is essential that some conditions are taken into account such as: free regimen, no milk supplementation, because in this way the baby will be protected. <sup>(12)</sup>

Carvalho et al <sup>(13)</sup> cite other benefits such as protecting the health of the infant, who will have less risk of severe infections and death (for example: diarrhea, which is frequent in artificial feeding), reduces the risk of premature necrotizing enterocolitis, respiratory disease, allergy, intestinal parasites, diabetes, juvenile arthritis, and lymphomas. The child when breastfed has better development of facial structures (dental arches and palate) and lower incidence of caries. Intellectual and psychosocial development will be favored. Children who breastfeed are smarter and are more successful in school life. Greater physical contact brings less risk of illness and death, also facilitating relationships and sociability. <sup>(13)</sup>

The practice of breastfeeding (BF) is not restricted only to the mother and child, but has consequences for society, as once the child is adequately nourished, it has repercussions in the reduction of neonatal and infant morbidity and mortality rates. <sup>(14)</sup>

When offering other liquids (water, tea, juice, etc.) together with breastfeeding before six months, which is a frequent practice, it can result in a decrease in breast milk consumption and, consequently, generate less milk extraction and production, contributing to early weaning, lower weight gain in the child, higher risk of diarrhea. <sup>(15)</sup>

It is concluded that breastfeeding is not only a biological issue, but also a social, cultural and psycho-emotional one. Many pregnant women, already in prenatal care, decide not to breastfeed <sup>(6)</sup>

Even with the evidence of the numerous advantages of breastfeeding and the improvement of the situation of breastfeeding in Brazil evidenced in the scientific literature, the indicators have revealed a tendency towards stabilization and are well below the recommended by the World Health Organization and the Ministry of Health, exclusive breastfeeding for up to six months of age and supplemented for two years or more. This reality shows that early weaning has a great impact on children's health. <sup>(16)</sup>

Despite the recommendation and benefits of breastfeeding, breastfeeding rates worldwide are still far from being reached and there are several reasons that interfere with this practice. Women may want to breastfeed, however, they encounter social, cultural and political barriers throughout the pregnancy-puerperal cycle, harming its beginning and continuity. <sup>(17)</sup>

The topic of breastfeeding has been the subject of research around the world, considering the various aspects of breast milk and breastfeeding. Despite all the scientific advances and the dissemination of the superiority of human milk and the advantages of breastfeeding, breastfeeding rates in Brazil are well below the recommended. According to the Ministry of Health, in 2008, the prevalence of exclusive breastfeeding in children under 6 months was 41% in Brazilian capitals and the Federal District, the median duration of exclusive breastfeeding was 1.8 months and the median duration of breastfeeding maternal age of 11.2 months. <sup>(18)</sup>

Considering the great positive impact of BF for the child, mother, family, society and observing the low adherence of mothers to BF, the United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef), in partnership with the WHO, launched in 1991-1992 the Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiative (BFHI), which was incorporated by the Ministry of Health as a priority action in 1992. The objective of this initiative is to protect, promote and support optimal nutrition for infants and young children, in order to achieve and maintain and the practices necessary to enable mothers, families and health professionals to give all children the best start in life. <sup>(19)</sup>

The study by Queluz et al <sup>(20)</sup> with a population of 275 children under 6 months of age, showed that the mean age, in days, of children under 6 months who were receiving exclusive breast milk was 60.6 days, standard deviation, 45.9 days and median, 47.5 days. <sup>(20)</sup>

Many beliefs are transmitted from generation to generation, and these interfere with the proper development of the breastfeeding process, leading many women to early weaning. Among them, the myth that milk is weak, the association between breast size and milk production capacity, and the use of teas for the management of colic stand out. Among the factors mentioned above, it is still noticeable how much mothers are still unaware of aspects inherent to the practice of BF. It is also evident the lack of knowledge, mainly regarding the composition of human milk, as well as its effectiveness in protecting from diseases. <sup>(14)</sup>

The results of a research by Junges et al, showed that the women interviewed feel strongly influenced by cultural aspects, referring to the relevance of the opinion of family members and health professionals, their own experiences in breastfeeding, the influence of aesthetic standards of beauty, and the construction of affective bonds between mother and child through breastfeeding, which culturally conditions the figure of the good mother as the one who breastfeeds. The strictly biological aspects emerged to a lesser extent and, when mentioned, they mainly punctuated the benefits to the baby's health. <sup>(21)</sup>

Carvalho et al <sup>(17)</sup> state that at the individual level, mother and child face a learning period which can be positive or negative for the duration and choice of BF type. Difficulties in initiating breastfeeding are common and pose a risk for early weaning. The authors cite other factors that interfere with the continuation of breastfeeding, which are those related to milk production, psychosocial factors, the nutritional and satisfaction situation of the child, the woman's lifestyle and health

condition, and also the presence of pain. when breastfeeding and difficulties with positioning and attaching the child to the breast.

Illnesses involving the mother can constitute important obstacles to breastfeeding. Poor breastfeeding technique, infrequent feedings and at predetermined times, are important factors that can predispose to the onset of lactation complications, such as: breast engorgement, nipple trauma and low milk production, since they constitute conditions leading to inadequate breast emptying. <sup>(22)</sup>

Fialho et al <sup>(23)</sup> concluded that the main reasons related to weaning are the use of pacifiers and bottles, expressions such as “the milk dried up” and the “baby cried”, “weak breast milk”. There is also the influence of socioeconomic level, the mother's level of education, maternal work, encouragement from the spouse and relatives, and the mother's intention to breastfeed. <sup>(23)</sup>

Young mothers, primiparous and/or women without an employment relationship, are possibly those who have greater difficulty in EBF, with water and non-breast milk being the most offered foods.

Therefore, several factors have been considered determinants of early weaning, among them, the low educational and socioeconomic level of the mother, early motherhood, parity, the attention of the health professional in prenatal consultations and work outside the home stand out. <sup>(24)</sup>

Law No. 7,498 says that it is up to the nurse, a member of the health team, to provide assistance to women during the pregnancy- puerperal cycle. <sup>(25)</sup>

The nursing professional acting directly in encouraging Breastfeeding, due to the fact of having greater direct contact with puerperal women and newborns, being present in the prenatal, immediate, mediate and late puerperium periods. In this way, the implementation of interventions, through intra-hospital and inter-institutional actions, provided by qualified professionals capable of performing nursing care aimed at helping to promote adequate latch and breast care, becomes effective as in which they are implemented and bring benefits to the nursing mother and newborn. <sup>(26)</sup> Batista et al <sup>(27)</sup> state that it is important for the nursing professional to carry out more home visits, not only focused on aspects of the physical examination, but considering the home visit as a daily instrument for health promotion actions, in which the professional is attentive to the specificities and particularities of each family. However, it is necessary to implement actions of education and encouragement of breastfeeding in the Basic Health Unit, allowing greater opportunities to disseminate and promote breastfeeding, encouraging mothers to breastfeed their children. In this way, it can contribute to the reduction of the rate of early weaning.

Health professionals need to have knowledge and skills in both the clinical practice of lactation and clinical skills in counseling. The guidelines on BF are not limited to prenatal care, but extends to the hospital, prepartum, delivery and postpartum areas. In this sense, it is important for the health team to know the mother's daily life and the sociocultural context to which they belong, their doubts, fears and expectations, as well as myths and beliefs regarding breastfeeding, so that they can demystify consolidated practices. that negatively influence lactation. <sup>(28)</sup>

Nurses must develop humanized care, as this aspect is extremely relevant as a multiplier of information, being able to carry out a socio-educational approach at the primary health level, with low cost and high effectiveness, and also the absence of adverse side effects, in which the cost-effectiveness advantages are great. It is believed that the more the mother is guided and committed, the greater the success in the practice of breastfeeding. The contributions of nursing in the practice of breastfeeding are extremely important, both for knowledge and for the information and practice that becomes paramount. In this context, the nurse acts as a manager and, together with this position, he/she needs to promote information through specific awareness and counseling strategies, as the need requires. <sup>(10)</sup>

Another factor that directly affects the practice of breastfeeding is the way health professionals approach mothers when providing breastfeeding counseling. The health professional listens and tries to understand how the mother feels, tries to help the mother decide what is best for her, decide what to do, and gain self-confidence. It seeks to help the mother to live the breastfeeding process in a healthy way, both biologically, sensorially and psychologically. It is in this context that they call attention to the difference between counseling and counseling, stating that the first concept is to tell the person what they should do and that counseling is a way of working with the mother where the professional listens to her, tries to understand her. she and, with her knowledge, offers help, in order to give the mother the opportunity to plan, make decisions and strengthen herself to deal with pressure, increasing her self-confidence and self-esteem. <sup>(29)</sup>

The support of the health team and their dedication are fundamental for the success of breastfeeding and for the prevention of trauma and mastitis, which occur in the first days of puerperium. It is important that nurses know these difficulties and intervene, so that lactation is successful, since the difficulties faced by women in the breastfeeding process can be predictive of weaning. <sup>(30)</sup>

Costa et al <sup>(31)</sup> conducted a survey with some health professionals and through the reports it was possible to show that many of them were unaware of the possible difficulties in breastfeeding. Thus, prior knowledge is necessary, as well as constant updates on BF, which can cover the guiding aspects of their care, from difficulties/complications, to ways of evaluating the breasts. This theoretical knowledge about lactation becomes essential for the realization of quality preventive care. For the subjects, the main interference of the implementation of BF is still the resistance of the puerperal women, in accepting the guidelines of the nursing team.

The nurse must reflect on the nursing orientation, which needs to be sensitive and uniform with regard to breastfeeding. It is not enough to tell the pregnant woman that she "has" to breastfeed, that breast milk already has specific nutrients for the baby, which favors the mother-child bond, which has no cost, among many other advantages. Information about breastfeeding requires effective care in an empathic, comprehensive way, without prejudice or presuppositions, and that allows entering the world of the primiparous's life, trying to understand the social relationships that influenced the development of breastfeeding. <sup>(6)</sup>



The support of health services and professionals is extremely important for breastfeeding to be successful. In the course of educational activities aimed at women and children, the importance of exclusive breastfeeding up to six months should be emphasized, emphasizing the benefits of breast milk that protects the baby from infections and allergies, enumerating the other advantages of breastfeeding for the baby and mother. Providing help to mother and child in the breastfeeding process is not just a technique procedure and requires a series of factors such as skill and empathetic attitude, this process being called counseling. <sup>(5)</sup>

### **Final considerations**

The risk factors for breastfeeding not occurring range from the use of bottles, pacifiers and complementary feeding to socioeconomic and psychological factors of the mother. Thus, the success of exclusive breastfeeding can be influenced by an integral approach, focused on the care of the mother and baby within the context in which they are inserted and the effectiveness of multiprofessional and interdisciplinary programs at all levels of Health Care, from pregnancy until the end of the puerperal period.

The performance of nursing, according to the results found in the selected articles, therefore involves information and guidance aimed at education and health promotion, in the sense of demystifying ideas culturally perpetuated by common sense that end up interfering negatively in the entire process. that involves breastfeeding, especially the social pressure that involves it.

This study supports the investment in research that can support effective public policies to improve breastfeeding rates in Brazil, reflecting benefits for mothers, children, families and Brazilian society as a whole.

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