

Health Beliefs and Breastfeeding Practices During Ramadan Fasting

NUSRAT LAKHO¹, SAIRA SAEED², ANILA MAHMOOD³, SHABANA LAKHO⁴ CHANDRA MADHU DAS⁵, NAJMA BANO SHAIKH⁶

1Associate professor, Department of Obstetrics & Gynaecology, ISRA University, Karachi-Campus, Pakistan

2Assistant professor, Department of Obstetrics & Gynaecology, ISRA University, Karachi-Campus, Pakistan

3Assistant professor, Department of Obstetrics & Gynaecology Liaquat University of Medical and Health Sciences, Jamshoro

4Assistant professor, Gastroenterology Department, SMBB University Larkana, Pakistan

5,6Associate professor, Department of Obstetrics & Gynaecology Liaquat University of Medical and health Sciences, Jamshoro

Correspondence to: Dr. Nusrat Lakho, Email: dnmusratlakho@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

Objective: To determine the health beliefs and breast feeding practices among lactating women during Ramadan fasting.

Study Design: Descriptive cross sectional

Setting and duration: This was a hospital based study conducted from July to September 2017 at Department of Obstetrics & Gynaecology Isra University, Karachi Campus.

Methods: Total 279 lactating mothers were included in the study after taking informed consent. Pre designed questionnaire were used for interview and collection of data which was based on close ended questions. Data was collected in post Ramadan period from all lactating mothers whoever fasted during Ramadan.

Results: Total 279 women were enrolled in the study after informed consent. Among 279 women, 166 (59.50%) found uneducated and housewives 274 (98.2%). 82.2% mothers were fasting. 162 (58.1%) mothers felt difficulty to fast during lactation. Mothers believed weakness occurs due to poor nutrition. During fasting, thirst /Hunger and weakness (31.5% & 37% respectively) were the most common concerns reported. 76% of total mothers were aware about religious relaxation that they are allowed to "repay their fasting debt" after breastfeeding, by fasting and by giving fidya.

Conclusion: It is conclude that Ramadan fasting is common in breastfeeding mothers and practice of fasting was mainly affected by feeling of weakness and dehydration. Healthcare providers need to understand and respect the beliefs, practices and should provide culturally appropriate care and encourage taking appropriate diet with adequate calories.

Key words: Breastfeeding, Ramadan fasting, health beliefs

INTRODUCTION

Globally, Islam is the 2nd largest religion, with over 1.6 billion believers. In Islam, Ramadan is the most sacred month, as in this month "the Quran" was revealed, which is the holy scripture of Islam.¹ Fasting during Ramadan is among the five principles of Islam, and each year, all Muslim healthy adults are required to keep fast from dawn to dusk for 30 days. Muslims keep fasts to acquire self-restraint, self-control, for purification of the body, and to sympathize with the impoverished and hungry people.^{2,3} The Quran says, "O believers! Fasting has been commanded for you, as it has been for those preceding you, in the expectation that you would become pious."⁴ Since all Muslim adults are required to fast throughout Ramadan, some persons are excluded, such as the feeble elderly, the extremely sick, travelers, menstruating females, expectant and nursing mothers who are concerned regarding their own or their babies' health, and they can pay atonement or keep fasts at some other time.⁵⁻⁸ Despite the religious flexibility, a few breastfeeding mothers choose to fast, while others are careful and aware of the fasting because food and drink consumption is forbidden from dawn to dusk. Many factors, including maternal diet and lactation stage, appear to influence the composition and concentration of human milk. Breast feeding has been well established to be advantageous to newborns and is linked to their better physiological, biological, and cognitive development.^{9,10} Keeping fasts in Ramadan among breastfeeding women must not be considered only from the perspective of nutrition and

feeding. According to research, keeping fasts in Ramadan influences circadian rhythms, resulting in greater daytime sleeping, decline of irritation, and attention. The infant's growth is mostly determined by their interactions and bonds with their mothers.¹¹ The aim of this study was to look the mothers' health perceptions and breastfeeding behaviors during Ramadan.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

This is a descriptive cross sectional study, conducted from July to September 2017 at Department of Obstetrics & Gynaecology of Isra University Hospital Karachi Campus. Total 279 lactating mothers were included in the study after informed consent. All the women those who were not agree to participate in the study were excluded. Pre-designed questionnaires were used for interview and collection of data based on close ended questions. Data was collected in post Ramadan period from all lactating mothers who ever fasted during Ramadan. All the data was collected via study proforma and analysis of the data was done by using SPSS version 20.

RESULTS

Total of 279 breast feeding females were studied. Table 1 represents demographic features of study participants. Majority of women (55.9%) fall in age group of 12-25 years, most of the women (59.50%) were uneducated and almost all women (98.2%) were house wives.

Most of the respondents (76.0%) were aware that fasting during Ramadan is compulsory and more than that (82.2%) were fasting during these days. 85.7% of them fasted 1-10 days and 9.5% of women successfully completed 21-30 days.

58% of lactating women experienced difficulty in fasting, 37% felt weakness and 31.5% were feeling hungry and thirsty.

All respondents were aware that they are allowed to repay their "fasting debt" after delivery by fasting 49.8% and by giving fidya 37.6%.

Table 1: Demographics of study participants (n = 279)

Age Groups	Frequency	Percent
12-25 years	156	55.90%
26-35 years	112	40.10%
36-45 years	11	3.90%
Education		
Uneducated	166	59.50%
Matric	61	21.86%
Intermediate	39	13.98%
Graduate	13	4.66%
Occupation		
Religious scholar	01	0.40%
House wife	274	98.20%
Nurse	02	0.70%
Tailor	01	0.40%
Teacher	01	0.40%

Table II: Fasting practices of lactating mothers (n=279)

Do you fast during Ramadan?	Frequency	Percent
Yes	231	82.2%
No	48	17.2%
Do you think breastfeeding mothers should fast?		
No	30	10.8%
Yes	244	87.5%
Don't know	5	1.8%
Do you think fasting during lactation is more difficult that in non-lactating state?		
No	117	41.9%
Yes	162	58.1%
If it is difficult to fast during lactation, so what are its reasons?		
Feeling more hungry	51	31.5%
feeling very weak	60	37.0%
Feeling more sleepy	14	8.6%
Feeling more thirsty	37	22.8%

Table III: knowledge of law of fasting during lactation. (n = 279)

	Frequency	Percentage
Essential (Farz)	212	76.0%
Recommended (Wajib)	55	19.7%
Permissible (Sunnah)	4	1.4%
Not necessary, if we fast it will give reward, if do not fast then there is no punishment.	8	2.9%
If you are not able to fast during Ramadan how will you redo it?		
By fasting	139	49.8%
By giving fidya	105	37.6%
Others	35	12.5%
Nullifying factors for non-fasting?		
Feel weak	188	67%%
The unborn child may be under-weight	6	2.2%
Spouse asking not to fast	3	1.1%
Parents asking not to fast	5	1.8%
Family pressure	10	3.6%
In laws asking not to fast	2	0.7%
Because of advice of health care provider	27	9.7%
Others	38	13.6%

DISCUSSION

There are numerous obstacles that can prohibit Muslim females from adhering to Islamic teachings regarding pregnancy and breastfeeding, and the Quran makes no direct statement of breast-feeding mothers being exempted from fasting during Ramadan. ¹ The Quran says: "There is a reward for anyone who can perform it with difficulty." (Surah 2:184) ³ Fasting during Ramadan affects billions of the Muslims worldwide, as well as their healthcare experts. Many Muslim females who are breastfeeding prefer fasting in Ramadan for social and spiritual reasons, since it is more challenging to fast solely later when they have to compensate for missing days. ^{2,12-15} In present study, 87% of lactating women were fasting. We found that fasting in month of Ramadan by breast feeding mothers is common. In another study, 43% of the mothers were found to fast during Ramadan. Similar results were found in a study by Gokdmirel et al, as rate of fasting among breast feeding mothers were 45.6% and another study was also consistent with similar results of 51.8% of fasting breast feeding women¹¹. In present study 76% of women considered fasting in Ramadan as compulsory and having knowledge about the religious relaxation to lactating mothers given by Islam, there can be an explanation that mothers might have strong religious beliefs. Similarly, in another study, 87% of the lactating mothers had knowledge about religious relaxation¹⁶. Every Gregorian year, Ramadan starts 11 or 12 days early. As a result, Ramadan revolves across the seasons, taking around 33 years to complete the 12-month cycle. Ramadan might therefore take place in all the four seasons (summer to autumn). As a result, seasonally, each fasting period can last anywhere from 11 to 18 hours.^{17,18} Fasting in the summer is more challenging than fasting in winter, as summer is hot and days are longer.³ Even healthy people find it challenging to fast during Ramadan during hottest and longest fasting days. and in these days, breastfeeding mothers are more at risk for dehydration, as eating and drinking is prohibited from dawn to dusk and usually ¹².

In our study, main reason of women for not fasting was feeling of weakness (66%), feeling hungry (31.5%) and feeling thirsty (22.2%), similar results were found in other study reporting that 59% of mothers faced physical symptoms of feeling thirsty and weak ¹⁶. There is limited research on breastfeeding women's fasting habits. When the baby suckles often, a mother having relative/severe malnutrition may produce a good-quality, normal breast milk, however the breast milk carries less vitamin and fat (WHO/UNICEF). Furthermore, while fasting women's breast milk contains reduced amounts of some minerals and vitamins, this has no effect on their babies' development and growth.^{13, 19,20} The Ramadan is a sacred and special time for Muslim females, but healthcare professionals also advise them regarding the risks of keeping fasts during lactation and pregnancy.

CONCLUSION

It is concluded that the majority of lactating mothers chose to fast and practice of fasting by breastfeeding mothers was mainly affected by feeling of weakness and dehydration. There is usually an increase in number of women visiting the emergency department during

Ramadan due to fasting, fasting can possibly result in dehydration and fatigue (especially during long days of fasting and hot weather) that will have an impact on a woman's potential to breastfeed properly. Healthcare providers need to understand and respect the beliefs, practices and able to provide culturally appropriate care and encourage to take appropriate diet with adequate calories. The medical and clinical implications of breast feeding while fasting are complicated due to the spiritual, religious, and social context, which influences Muslim women's health, practices and beliefs, particularly during Ramadan. When contemplating how to address the medical and health demands of breastfeeding women, all of these elements, as well as basic knowledge, should be taken into account.

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