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BRIEF ORIGINAL

CHALLENGES OF BREASTFEEDING IN HAITIAN WOMEN IN CHILE

DESAFÍOS DE LA LACTANCIA MATERNA EN MUJERES HAITIANAS EN CHILE

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To identify the knowledge and practices about breastfeeding in Haitian women hospitalized in the postpartum period at the San Juan De Dios Hospital in Santiago, Chile. **Material and methods:** Cross-sectional descriptive study with a sample of 45 Haitian postpartum women between March and December 2019. The data were collected using a structured questionnaire validated by experts and translated into Creole. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data. **Results:** 90% of the women surveyed have general knowledge about breastfeeding, although only 30% can identify at least two specific benefits. 80% consider that exclusive breastfeeding should last at least six months. The majority of women (60%) believe that complementary foods should be introduced after six months. There is no association between sociodemographic variables and the level of knowledge. **Conclusions:** The findings underscore the need for educational programs that address cultural and linguistic barriers to improve breastfeeding rates in this population.

Key words: Breastfeeding, Haitian women, Knowledge, Cultural barriers (Fuente: MeSH, NLM)

RESUMEN

Objetivo: Identificar los conocimientos y prácticas sobre lactancia materna en mujeres haitianas hospitalizadas en el puerperio en el Hospital San Juan De Dios en Santiago, Chile. **Material y métodos:** Estudio descriptivo transversal con una muestra de 45 puérperas haitianas entre marzo y diciembre de 2019. Los datos se recolectaron mediante un cuestionario estructurado validado por expertos y traducido al creole. Se utilizó estadística descriptiva para analizar los datos. **Resultados:** El 90% de las mujeres encuestadas posee conocimientos generales sobre la lactancia materna, aunque solo el 30% puede identificar al menos dos beneficios específicos. El 80% considera que la lactancia materna exclusiva debe durar al menos seis meses. La mayoría de las mujeres (60%) opinan que los alimentos complementarios deben introducirse después de los seis meses. No existe asociación entre las variables sociodemográficas y el nivel de conocimiento. **Conclusiones:** Los hallazgos subrayan la necesidad de programas educativos que aborden las barreras culturales y lingüísticas para mejorar las tasas de lactancia materna en esta población.

Palabras clave: Lactancia materna, Mujeres haitianas, Conocimientos, Barreras culturales (Fuente: DeCS, BIREME)

INTRODUCTION

The World Health Organization (WHO) and other health authorities recommend exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of the infant's life, supplementing it with other foods until the infant is two years old or older. Breastfeeding (breastfeeding) offers multiple benefits for both mother and newborn. For the mother, in the short term, it is associated with increased uterine contraction, rapid uterine involution, and decreased postpartum bleeding. In the medium term, BF prolongs amenorrhea and facilitates rapid weight regain. In the long term, it reduces the risk of breast and ovarian cancer (1). For the newborn, it prevents infections, obesity and allergies, in addition to strengthening the mother-child emotional bond and representing economic savings (2). However, only 35% of infants worldwide are exclusively breastfed for the first four months (3).

The decision to breastfeed is influenced by economic, educational, social, and cultural factors (4). In Chile, the arrival of foreign population has caused a significant demographic change since the 1990s. In particular, the Haitian population has grown remarkably, facing cultural and linguistic barriers that can affect their breastfeeding practices. This study seeks to identify knowledge about BF in Haitian women hospitalized in the puerperium in the maternity ward of the San Juan De Dios Hospital in Santiago, Chile.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Studio Designs

A cross-sectional descriptive study was conducted in the maternity ward of the San Juan De Dios Hospital in Santiago, Chile, between March and December 2018.

Population and sample

The sample included 45 Haitian postpartum women selected through non-probabilistic intentional sampling. The inclusion criteria were: Haitian women in the postpartum period who had had a normal delivery or cesarean section and who knew how to read and write Creole. Those who did not want to participate voluntarily and those who could not read Creole were excluded.

Data collection methods

Information collection was carried out using a structured questionnaire designed specifically for this study. The questionnaire consisted of two main sections: Sociodemographic Data and Knowledge about Breastfeeding.

Questionnaire validation

Expert Review: The questionnaire was reviewed by five breastfeeding and public health experts to assess the clarity, relevance, and coverage of the items. The experts included a midwife with 20 years of experience, a pediatrician specializing in breastfeeding with 15 years of experience, a nutritionist with 10 years of experience, a psychologist with 12 years of experience in public health, and an epidemiologist with 18 years of experience.

Pilot test

A pilot test was carried out with 20 Haitian women who met the inclusion criteria. This test allowed the language and structure of the questionnaire to be adjusted to improve the comprehension and accuracy of the answers.

Translation and back-translation

The questionnaire was translated into Creole by a professional translator and then back-translated into Spanish by another translator to check the consistency of the translation.

Statistical analysis

The data collected were entered into an Excel spreadsheet and descriptive statistics were used to analyze them, presenting the results in absolute and relative frequencies. To identify associations between knowledge and sociodemographic variables, the chi-square test was used.

Ethical considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all participants ensuring their understanding of the purpose of the study and ensuring the confidentiality of their personal information. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Santiago Occidente Metropolitan Health Service (SSV).

RESULTS

Descriptive Analysis

The sociodemographic characteristics and level of knowledge about breastfeeding of 45 Haitian women in the postpartum period were evaluated (**Table 1**). Most Haitian women surveyed (73.3%) were between 20 and 30 years old, while 26.7% were in the 31-38 age range. Regarding their level of schooling, 42.2% had completed secondary education, followed by 40.0% who had primary education and 15.6% with higher education. In relation to the activity, 57.8% worked as cleaning assistants and 42.2% did not work. Regarding marital status, 51.1% of the women were single, 35.6% married and 13.3% divorced.

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics

	n	%
Age		
20-30 years	33	73,3
21-38 years old	12	26,7
Level of schooling		
Primary	18	40
High school	19	42,2
Superior	7	15,6
Activity		
Cleaning assistant	26	57,8
Not working	19	42,2
Marital status		
Single	23	51,1
married woman	16	35,6
Divorcee	6	13,3
Total	**45**	**100,0**

Breastfeeding Knowledge

The descriptive analysis (**Table 2**) showed that 40% of the women considered themselves "fairly informed" about breastfeeding while 28.9% considered themselves "very informed". Only 11.1% considered themselves "not at all informed." Most participants (44.4%) considered breastfeeding "very important" for the health of the newborn, followed by 35.6% who considered it "quite important".

Table 2. Knowledge about breastfeeding and associated practices

	n	%
Level of knowledge		
Not at all informed	5	11,1
A little informed	9	20
Quite knowledgeable	18	40
Very knowledgeable	13	28,9
Importance of breastfeeding		
Not at all informed	2	4,4
A little informed	7	15,6
Quite knowledgeable	16	35,6
Very knowledgeable	20	44,4
Duration of SCI		
Less than 6 months	9	20
6 months or more	36	80
Introduction of complementary foods		
Before 6 months	18	40
After 6 months	27	60
Perceptions of Artificial Breastfeeding		
Recognized Benefits	19	43
Does not replace breast milk	3	7
Don't know/Don't answer	23	50
Sources of information		
Health professionals	27	60
Family	9	20
School/University in Haiti	4	8,9
He did not receive information	1	2,2
Total	**45**	**100,0**

SCI: Exclusive breastfeeding

Partnership Analysis

Chi-square tests were performed to assess associations between sociodemographic variables and breastfeeding knowledge, duration of exclusive breastfeeding, introduction of complementary foods, perceptions of artificial breastfeeding, and sources of information, but no significant association was found.

DISCUSSION

90 per cent of Haitian mothers surveyed had general knowledge about breastfeeding, which is encouraging. However, only 30% were able to identify at least two specific benefits, suggesting the need to strengthen education about the specific benefits of breastfeeding. These findings are consistent with previous studies that have highlighted the importance of breastfeeding education to improve breastfeeding knowledge and practices (5,6).

80% of the interviewees consider that exclusive breastfeeding should last at least six months, in line with the WHO recommendations (1). The variability in perceptions about the appropriate duration of breastfeeding underscores the importance of consistent and clear guidance from health professionals. This variability has also been observed in other contexts, highlighting the influence of cultural and educational factors on breastfeeding practices (7).

Most women believe that it is necessary to introduce complementary foods after six months, which is in line with international recommendations (2). The variability in responses reflects cultural practices and personal experiences that influence their decisions. Studies have shown that perceptions and practices about the introduction of complementary foods vary significantly between different cultures and socioeconomic contexts (8).

Artificial breastfeeding is perceived as beneficial by a significant part of the respondents, highlighting the comfort and ease for working mothers. This underscores the need for policies that support working mothers so that they can continue breastfeeding. The perception of artificial breastfeeding as a viable alternative has been documented in several studies, especially in contexts where mothers face challenges in balancing work and breastfeeding (9).

The fact that many women rely on lay sources for information about breastfeeding highlights the importance of providing quality education through health professionals. Reliance on lay sources for health information is a common barrier in many immigrant communities and underscores the need for professional-led interventions (10).

Language and cultural barriers are major challenges for Haitian women in Chile. It is crucial to adapt educational and communication strategies to overcome these barriers. The literature has extensively documented how cultural and language barriers can negatively affect access to and utilization of health services, including breastfeeding (11,12).

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that although postpartum Haitian women hospitalized at the San Juan De Dios Hospital in Santiago, Chile, have general knowledge about breastfeeding, only a minority can identify specific benefits. Most support exclusive breastfeeding for at least six months but face significant cultural and language barriers. These findings highlight the need for culturally adapted educational programs and supportive policies to improve breastfeeding rates in this population, thereby contributing to maternal and infant health.

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Contributions:

Andrea Velásquez Muñoz: Conceptualization, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Research, Methodology, Project Management, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – Review and Editing.