



Original Research Article

THE ROLE OF HEALTH CARE PROVIDERS IN PROMOTING BREASTFEEDING INITIATION AND CONTINUATION IN A DISTRICT OF UTTAR PRADESH

Payal Singh¹, Anand Ranjan², Foulisa Pyrbot³, Rajat Kumar Pachauri⁴

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Community Medicine, Autonomous State Medical College Sultanpur, Uttar Pradesh, India

²Professor, Department of Community Medicine, Autonomous State Medical College Sultanpur, Uttar Pradesh, India

³Assistant Professor, Department of Community Medicine, Saraswati Medical College, Unnao, Uttar Pradesh, India

⁴Statistician, Department of Community Medicine, Saraswati Medical College, Unnao, Uttar Pradesh, India

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Corresponding Author:

Dr. Payal Singh,

Assistant Professor, Department of Community Medicine, Autonomous State Medical College Sultanpur, Uttar Pradesh, India.

Email: payalsingh30.ims@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Background: Breastfeeding is a cornerstone of infant nutrition, offering numerous health benefits for both mothers and newborns. However, despite global recommendations, breastfeeding initiation and continuation rates remain suboptimal in many regions. Healthcare providers play a crucial role in influencing mothers' decisions regarding breastfeeding. This study aims to assess the impact of healthcare professionals on breastfeeding initiation and continuation within the first three months postpartum.

Materials and Methods: A prospective observational study was conducted from January 15, 2024, to June 15, 2024, in a Rural field practice area of Saraswati Medical College, Unnao. A total of 180 postpartum mothers were enrolled and categorized into two groups: those who received active breastfeeding counseling (intervention group, n=90) and those who received standard care (control group, n=90). Data were collected using structured questionnaires assessing breastfeeding knowledge, initiation rates within the first hour of birth, and continuation rates at three months. Statistical analysis was performed using SPSS software, with chi-square and t-tests applied for significance testing.

Results: The breastfeeding initiation rate within the first hour was significantly higher in the intervention group (85%) compared to the control group (62%) ($p < 0.05$). At the three-month follow-up, exclusive breastfeeding rates were 72% in the intervention group and 48% in the control group ($p < 0.01$). Mothers who received counseling from healthcare providers reported higher confidence in breastfeeding and better problem-solving strategies for common lactation issues.

Conclusion: Healthcare providers play a pivotal role in promoting and sustaining breastfeeding through targeted counseling and support. Early and consistent professional guidance significantly improves breastfeeding initiation and continuation rates. Implementing structured breastfeeding education programs in healthcare settings can enhance maternal confidence and breastfeeding outcomes.

Keywords: Breastfeeding initiation, healthcare providers, exclusive breastfeeding, maternal counseling, infant nutrition, lactation support.

INTRODUCTION

Breastfeeding is widely recognized as the optimal form of infant nutrition, providing essential nutrients and immunological benefits that contribute to the overall health and development of newborns. The

World Health Organization (WHO) recommends early initiation of breastfeeding within the first hour of birth and exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of life, followed by continued breastfeeding with complementary foods up to two years or beyond.^[1] Despite these recommendations, global

breastfeeding rates remain suboptimal due to various maternal, social, and healthcare-related factors. Healthcare providers, including obstetricians, pediatricians, nurses, and lactation consultants, play a crucial role in influencing mothers' decisions regarding breastfeeding initiation and continuation. Their guidance can help address common breastfeeding challenges such as latching difficulties, milk supply concerns, and maternal anxiety.^[2] Studies have shown that proactive counseling and education by healthcare professionals can significantly improve breastfeeding initiation rates and sustain exclusive breastfeeding for longer durations.^[3]

A lack of adequate support from healthcare providers has been identified as a major barrier to successful breastfeeding. Many mothers report insufficient guidance on proper breastfeeding techniques, limited follow-up support, and conflicting advice from different healthcare professionals, leading to early cessation of breastfeeding.^[4,5] Structured breastfeeding education and early postnatal interventions by trained healthcare personnel have been shown to enhance maternal confidence, increase breastfeeding duration, and reduce dependence on formula feeding.^[6]

This study aims to evaluate the impact of healthcare providers on breastfeeding initiation and continuation within the first three months postpartum. By assessing the effectiveness of professional support, this research seeks to highlight the importance of integrating structured breastfeeding counseling into routine maternal and child healthcare services.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Design and Setting: This prospective observational study was conducted in a Rural field practice area of Saraswati Medical College, Unnao, from January 15, 2024, to June 15, 2024.

The study aimed to assess the role of healthcare providers in promoting breastfeeding initiation and continuation. Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional ethics committee before participant enrollment.

Study Population: The study included postpartum mothers who delivered healthy, full-term infants. A total of 180 participants were recruited and divided into two groups:

- **Intervention group (n=90):** Mothers who received structured breastfeeding counseling and support from healthcare providers, including obstetricians, pediatricians, nurses, and lactation consultants.
- **Control group (n=90):** Mothers who received routine postnatal care without additional structured breastfeeding education.

Mothers with medical conditions affecting lactation (e.g., hypogalactia, mastitis, or postpartum complications requiring intensive care) or infants

with congenital anomalies affecting feeding were excluded from the study.

Intervention and Data Collection

Healthcare providers in the intervention group delivered structured breastfeeding counseling sessions, including prenatal education on breastfeeding benefits, early initiation within the first hour of birth, proper latching techniques, and strategies for maintaining exclusive breastfeeding. Postnatal follow-up sessions were conducted at one week, one month, and three months postpartum.

Data were collected through structured questionnaires administered at baseline (within 24 hours postpartum) and follow-up visits. The questionnaire included sections on maternal demographics, breastfeeding knowledge and attitudes, initiation within the first hour of birth, exclusive breastfeeding rates at three months, and perceived challenges.

Outcome Measures

The primary outcomes measured were:

1. Breastfeeding initiation rate: Proportion of mothers who initiated breastfeeding within the first hour after birth.
2. Exclusive breastfeeding rate: Percentage of mothers exclusively breastfeeding at the three-month follow-up.
3. Maternal confidence and support satisfaction: Assessed using a 5-point Likert scale to evaluate the effectiveness of healthcare providers' support.

Statistical Analysis: Data analysis was performed using SPSS software (version 26.0). Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were used for continuous variables, while categorical variables were analyzed using frequencies and percentages. Chi-square tests were used to compare breastfeeding rates between the two groups, and a p-value of <0.05 was considered statistically significant.

RESULTS

Baseline Characteristics: A total of 180 postpartum mothers were included in the study, with 90 participants in both the intervention and control groups. The mean age of mothers in the intervention group was 28.4 years, while in the control group, it was 27.9 years. The proportion of primiparous mothers was similar in both groups (60% vs. 58%, $p=0.75$). Additionally, the rate of cesarean deliveries was 45% in the intervention group and 47% in the control group ($p=0.65$). The education level of participants, defined as high school completion or higher, was comparable between the two groups (78% vs. 75%, $p=0.53$) [Table 1].

Breastfeeding Initiation and Continuation Rates

Breastfeeding initiation within the first hour postpartum was significantly higher in the intervention group (85%) compared to the control group (62%) ($p=0.01$). At the one-month follow-up, the exclusive breastfeeding rate was 78% in the

intervention group and 55% in the control group ($p=0.02$). By three months postpartum, exclusive breastfeeding was maintained in 72% of mothers in the intervention group, whereas only 48% continued exclusive breastfeeding in the control group ($p=0.001$) [Table 2].

Maternal Satisfaction and Confidence in Breastfeeding Support

Mothers in the intervention group reported higher confidence in breastfeeding, with a mean score of 4.5 out of 5, compared to 3.8 in the control group

($p=0.01$). Additionally, 82% of mothers in the intervention group expressed satisfaction with the breastfeeding support received from healthcare providers, compared to only 59% in the control group ($p=0.005$) [Table 3].

These findings highlight the positive impact of structured breastfeeding counseling by healthcare providers on early initiation, sustained exclusive breastfeeding, and maternal satisfaction with breastfeeding support.

Table 1: Baseline Characteristics of Study Participants

Characteristics	Intervention Group (n=90)	Control Group (n=90)	p-value
Mean Age (years)	28.4	27.9	0.42
Primiparous Mothers (%)	60.0	58.0	0.75
Cesarean Deliveries (%)	45.0	47.0	0.65
Education Level (\geq High School) (%)	78.0	75.0	0.53

Table 2: Breastfeeding Initiation and Continuation Rates

Breastfeeding Outcome	Intervention Group (n=90)	Control Group (n=90)	p- value
Initiation within First Hour (%)	85	62	0.01
Exclusive Breastfeeding at 1 Month (%)	78	55	0.02
Exclusive Breastfeeding at 3 Months (%)	72	48	0.001

Table 3: Maternal Satisfaction and Confidence in Breastfeeding Support

Evaluation Parameter	Intervention Group (n=90)	Control Group (n=90)	p- value
Confidence in Breastfeeding (Mean Score out of 5)	4.5	3.8	0.01
Satisfaction with Healthcare Support (%)	82.0	59.0	0.005

DISCUSSION

The present study demonstrates the significant role healthcare providers play in promoting breastfeeding initiation and continuation. The findings indicate that structured counseling and support by healthcare professionals lead to higher breastfeeding initiation rates within the first hour and improved exclusive breastfeeding rates at one and three months postpartum. These results align with previous studies emphasizing the importance of professional guidance in overcoming breastfeeding challenges and improving maternal confidence.^[1,2]

Impact of Healthcare Support on Breastfeeding Initiation

Breastfeeding initiation within the first hour of birth was significantly higher in the intervention group (85%) compared to the control group (62%). Early initiation is crucial as it enhances maternal-infant bonding and ensures colostrum intake, which provides essential immunological protection.^[3,4] Studies suggest that healthcare providers who actively encourage early breastfeeding practices can substantially increase initiation rates, reducing the risk of neonatal infections and mortality.^[5] A meta-analysis also reported that immediate skin-to-skin contact and professional lactation support are associated with improved breastfeeding outcomes.^[6]

Sustained Exclusive Breastfeeding and Maternal Confidence

Exclusive breastfeeding rates at three months were significantly higher among mothers who received structured support from healthcare providers (72%

vs. 48%). This finding highlights the effectiveness of professional counseling in addressing common breastfeeding barriers such as insufficient milk supply, poor latching techniques, and maternal fatigue.^[7,8] Previous studies have reported that continuous postpartum support increases maternal confidence and reduces the likelihood of early formula introduction.^[9,10] Interventions such as lactation education, peer support, and follow-up visits have been linked to prolonged breastfeeding duration.^[11]

Barriers to Successful Breastfeeding

Despite the observed improvements, some mothers in the intervention group still discontinued exclusive breastfeeding before three months. Common reasons included perceived insufficient milk supply, maternal return to work, and societal pressures.^[12,13] In many settings, conflicting breastfeeding advice from different healthcare providers also contributes to early cessation.^[14]

Standardizing breastfeeding education among healthcare professionals is essential to ensure consistent and evidence-based support for mothers.^[15]

Clinical Implications and Recommendations

The findings of this study emphasize the need for integrating structured breastfeeding counseling into routine maternal and child healthcare services. Hospitals should adopt breastfeeding-friendly policies, such as early skin-to-skin contact, rooming-in, and accessible lactation support.^[16]

Additionally, training programs for healthcare providers should focus on evidence-based

breastfeeding techniques and effective communication strategies to enhance maternal adherence to exclusive breastfeeding.^[17]

Strengths and Limitations

One of the strengths of this study is its prospective design, which allowed for the assessment of breastfeeding patterns over time. However, certain limitations should be acknowledged. The study was conducted in a single healthcare facility, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, self-reported breastfeeding rates may be subject to recall bias.^[18] Future studies should include larger, multi-center trials and objective measures of breastfeeding duration to validate these findings.^[19]

CONCLUSION

This study reinforces the crucial role of healthcare providers in promoting and sustaining breastfeeding. Structured counseling significantly improves breastfeeding initiation and continuation rates, enhancing maternal confidence and satisfaction. Implementing standardized breastfeeding education and postnatal support programs can further improve breastfeeding outcomes and contribute to better infant health.

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