



Psychosocial correlates of exclusive breastfeeding: A systematic review

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ABSTRACT

Background: the World Health Organization recommends that all infants worldwide are exclusively breastfed for the first 6 months of life for optimal health and development. However, very few women worldwide are meeting this recommendation. Psychosocial factors have been identified as potentially modifiable factors implicated in a woman's ability to successfully exclusively breastfeed, however there is very limited research examining these factors specifically for exclusive breastfeeding to 6 months duration. **Methods:** a search of psychological, nursing and medical databases was conducted in June 2011 for studies published from 2000 to 2011 examining psychological correlates of exclusive breastfeeding to four to 6 months duration.

Results: nine papers from eight studies were found to be eligible for the review. Psychological factors have been reported to be highly predictive of exclusive breastfeeding outcomes. Research to date shows that psychosocial factors are not only importantly implicated in exclusive breastfeeding duration but they can also be changed through intervention and experiences.

Conclusions: while there is a wealth of literature on the role of psychosocial factors in breastfeeding, there is very limited research specifically examining the role of psychosocial factors of exclusive breastfeeding to 6 months duration. Interpreting the results of the available literature is difficult due to the various methodologies and definitions of exclusive breastfeeding and small sample sizes. Further research, specifically, longitudinal cohort studies are needed which examine psychological determinants of exclusive breastfeeding and infant feeding methods from pregnancy through to 6 months postpartum.

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Background

Breastfeeding is widely recognised as the ideal form of infant feeding for optimal outcomes for both infant and mother. Breast milk is the optimal source of nutrition for the growth and development of an infant (Kramer and Kakuma, 2002; WHO, 2011). Breast milk provides infants under 6 months of age with all of their energy and nutrient requirements, and provides important advantages, for physical, neurological and cognitive development as well as protection from infectious diseases and allergies (Oddy et al., 2002). Babies who are not breastfed have an increased risk of morbidity and mortality from respiratory tract infections, atopic dermatitis, childhood asthma, type II

diabetes, obesity and sudden infant death syndrome (Horta et al., 2007; Ip et al., 2007). Research suggests the health benefits of breastfeeding in general are enhanced with a longer duration and intensity of breastfeeding (Chantry et al., 2006) and it is now recognised that exclusive breastfeeding (the consumption of breast milk only) from birth to 6 months of age is associated with the best outcomes for both infant and mother (Kramer and Kakuma, 2002; WHO, 2011).

The World Health Organization (WHO, 2011) currently recommends that all infants worldwide are exclusively breastfed for the first 6 months of life, with continued breastfeeding up to 2 years of age. However, very few women worldwide meet this recommendation. While initiation rates of exclusive breastfeeding are as high as 96% in developed countries such as Australia (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare; AIHW, 2011a,b), this rate dramatically declines in the first few weeks postpartum to only 15% of infants being exclusively breastfed at 5 months of age (AIHW, 2011a,b) and around 9% at 6 months (Australian Institute of Family Studies; AIFS, 2008; Forster et al., 2004). These rates are fairly consistent worldwide, with

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less than 36% of infants being exclusively breastfed at any point less than 6 months of age (UNICEF, 2011).

There is a substantial amount of literature describing the socio-demographic predictors of the initiation and duration of breastfeeding (O'Brien et al., 2008, 2009; AIHW, 2011a,b). The literature consistently shows that maternal age, socio-economic status, level of education, marital status and location are associated with breastfeeding initiation and duration. These demographic factors have not only been widely researched, they are also resistant to change. A recent study showed that psychosocial factors were more predictive of exclusive breastfeeding duration than demographic factors combined (O'Brien et al., 2008).

Given the proportion of women who are not meeting the WHO global recommendation of exclusive breastfeeding to 6 months, there is very limited research examining psychosocial predictors of exclusive breastfeeding duration. There is a wealth of literature examining the effects of psychosocial factors on breastfeeding in general, but given the complexity of examining exclusive breastfeeding and the small proportion of participants who achieve exclusive breastfeeding to 6 months, it can be very difficult to study. The aim of the current review was to identify empirical studies, from the last decade, which have examined psychosocial factors associated with exclusive breastfeeding duration. A meta-analysis was not possible given that the studies included here were too heterogeneous with very little consistency in relation to the collection and measurement of outcome data. The specific questions addressed in this review were as follows:

- (1) What psychosocial factors have been investigated as correlates of exclusive breastfeeding and what do the findings reveal?
- (2) What methodological issues arise in studies of exclusive breastfeeding to date?
- (3) What future recommendations can be given from research to date?

Our review was based on the guidelines set out by the PRISMA statement for systematic reviews (Moher et al., 2009).

Methods

Eligibility criteria

Papers were limited to those published in peer-reviewed journals in the English language between the years 2000 and 2011. Methodology was not limited in any way. The exclusion criteria were studies that paid a particular focus on disadvantaged groups or abnormality during pregnancy (e.g., teenage pregnancy, premature birth, gestational diabetes). In addition, studies were excluded from the review if they did not examine the duration of exclusive breastfeeding to at least 4 months postpartum.

Search strategy

The search strategy involved systematically reviewing published peer-reviewed articles from the years 2000 to 2011. The databases searched included the Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature (CINAHL), Medline, psychARTICLES and psychINFO. The search was performed for research articles investigating the effect of psychosocial factors on exclusive breastfeeding duration. The key terms used are shown in Box 1. This search strategy aimed to maximise the potential of finding all relevant papers published in the last 10 years. In addition to this search strategy, a hand search of the reference list of relevant papers was performed. The search was conducted in December 2011. An example of a full search strategy is shown in Fig. 1.

Box 1–Search terms.

Search Terms

Feeding AND Infant
Determinants AND infant AND feeding
Predictors AND infant AND feeding
Psychosocial AND determinants AND feeding

Determin* AND breast* AND infan*
Psych* AND determin* AND breast* AND infan*
Psych* AND determin* AND exclusive* AND feed*
Return to work AND breastfeed*
Exclusive* AND breastfeed*
Predict* AND Exclusive* AND depress*

Body image, self confidence, self-efficacy, stress, anxiety, body*, duration, locus of control

Databases: CINAHL, MEDLINE, PSYCHARTICLES & PSYCHINFO

Search 1:

“feeding” or “infant feeding” or “breastfeeding” or “breast feeding” or “bottle feeding” or “formula feeding” or “feeding method”

AND “psychosocial” or “psycho social” or “psychology”

AND “determin*” or “factor” or “predict*”

Limiters: All in abstract, peer reviewed & 2000–2011

125 articles found

26 articles selected

Search 2:

“feeding” or “infant feeding” or “breastfeeding” or “breast feeding” or “bottle feeding” or “formula feeding” or “feeding method”

AND “psychosocial” or “psycho social” or “psychology”

AND “determin*” or “factor” or “predict*”

AND “depress*” or “body image” or “self confidence” or “self efficacy” or “stress” or “anxiety”

Limiters: All in abstract, peer reviewed & 2000–2011

210 articles found

20 articles selected

Fig. 1. Example of a full search strategy.

Selection process

Studies were eligible for the review if they specifically examined psychosocial factors related to exclusive breastfeeding duration. Studies were not included that examined the effect on

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