LUMEN ET VIRTUS

Impact of early breastfeeding: Analysis of the physiological and psychosocial benefits of breastfeeding in the first hour postpartum

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ABSTRACT

Breastfeeding in the first hours of life is a practice that goes beyond nutrition, playing a vital role in the survival and health of newborns. The literature has shown that early initiation of breastfeeding is directly related to a significant reduction in neonatal mortality, especially in public health contexts. In addition to the immediate effects, breastfeeding in the first hours promotes the physiological stabilization of the baby and strengthens the immune system, offering a crucial defense against infections. However, misinformation and myths still permeate this practice, often compromising its success. This study aimed to examine, through a narrative review of the literature, the relevance of this practice, highlighting its positive impact and combating common misinformation about breastfeeding. The methodology adopted involved a qualitative and descriptive narrative review referring to the last ten years of publications (2014-2024), with a bibliographic search carried out in health databases such as: Scielo, PubMed and VHL. The initial search identified 359 studies, of which 84 were fully evaluated after screening. Of these, 39 articles were selected to compose the final review, offering a solid basis for the analysis. The review concludes that exclusive breastfeeding, without the introduction of unnecessary supplements, is sufficient for adequate nutrition of the newborn. In addition, the role of health professionals, especially doctors and nurses, is fundamental for the success of breastfeeding, through programs such as the Stork Network Project and the Kangaroo Method.

Keywords: Breastfeeding, Newborns, Infant Mortality, Maternal and Infant Health, Pediatrics.

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INTRODUCTION

Breastfeeding in the first hour of life, also known as early breastfeeding, is a topic of growing interest in the obstetric and neonatal scientific community (Lima; da Silva Nascimento; Martins, 2018). This practice, recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO), is associated with a series of benefits for both the newborn and the postpartum woman (WHO, 2023).

The transition from intrauterine to extrauterine life, characterized by the first 60 minutes after birth, represents a critical period of complex physiological adaptations for the neonate. This phase, called the "golden hour" in the scientific literature, is marked by rapid and significant changes in the cardiovascular, respiratory, immunological and metabolic systems of the newborn (NB) (Monteiro *et al.*, 2022). The importance of this time lag is widely recognized by the medical community, given its substantial impact on the child's subsequent development and long-term health (Salgueiro, 2022).

Breastfeeding, globally recognized as a fundamental pillar of child health, is advocated by renowned international organizations, such as the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the WHO, as well as by several entities dedicated to child protection (de Barros; Teixeira, 2022). Breastfeeding in the first hour postpartum, considered the inaugural feeding act of the human being, is a critical factor for the establishment of an adequate health, growth and development trajectory throughout the life cycle (Fields *et al.*, 2020).

This practice not only confers substantial benefits on children and women, but also represents a significant positive impact on society as a whole. From a public health perspective, early breastfeeding stands out as a highly sensitive, economically feasible, and remarkably effective intervention in promoting maternal and child health (Azevêdo *et al.*, 2023).

The early initiation of breastfeeding, particularly in the so-called "*Golden hour"* demonstrates a significant impact on the reduction of neonatal mortality. Robust epidemiological studies show that breastfeeding on the first day of life is associated with a 16% decrease in neonatal mortality rates. This protective effect is even more pronounced when breastfeeding is initiated in the first hour postpartum, bringing the reduction in mortality to 22% (Monteiro *et al.*, 2022).

It is noteworthy that the unique composition of breast milk contributes substantially to these favorable results. Rich in essential nutrients and bioactive factors, breast milk, especially colostrum, provides high-quality nutrition, perfectly adapted to the needs of the neonate. Its complex composition includes proteins, lipids, carbohydrates, vitamins, minerals, trace elements and a wide range of immunological components (Feitosa; Da Silva; da Silva, 2020). The latter confer a significant protective effect, enhancing the infant's immunity and providing benefits that extend throughout life (Luiza *et al.*, 2022).

Colostrum, often referred to as the "first natural vaccine", stands out for its ability to protect against various neonatal pathologies. Its effectiveness has been documented in preventing conditions

such as necrotizing enterocolitis, gastrointestinal and respiratory tract infections, allergic manifestations, septicemia, and meningitis. In addition to its immunological benefits, breast milk has the added advantage of always being available at the ideal temperature for the newborn's consumption, facilitating its ingestion and digestion (Galvão, 2024).

In this context, two low-complexity and high-impact interventions emerge as fundamental: Skin-to-Skin Contact (PPC) and Breastfeeding in the First Hour (PHC). These practices not only facilitate neonatal adaptation, but also promote the formation of the mother-child bond and act as protective factors against early neonatal complications, including hypothermia and hypoglycemia (Araújo *et al.*, 2021).

Despite the known benefits of early breastfeeding, adherence to this practice remains below the recommendations in many regions. Barriers such as lack of adequate support, misinformation, and practical challenges faced by mothers contribute to the low rate of breastfeeding in the first hours of life. These obstacles result in missed opportunities to significantly reduce neonatal mortality and improve the overall health of newborns. Identifying and overcoming these barriers is crucial to maximising the benefits of breastfeeding and improving neonatal survival rates (Vilela *et al.*, 2021).

The study is justified since investing in the promotion of immediate breastfeeding is essential for public health and encouraged by different health professionals, given its proven impact on reducing neonatal mortality and improving long-term health. Early intervention not only protects newborns against infectious diseases, but also lays a solid foundation for healthy development (Cavaglieri; Balduino, 2022).

This article aimed to examine, through a narrative review of the current literature, the importance of breastfeeding in the first hours of life, highlighting its impact on the reduction of neonatal mortality, its immunological and nutritional benefits, and the demystification of misinformation regarding breastfeeding.

METHODS

This scientific research is configured as a narrative review of the literature, of a qualitative and descriptive nature (Gonçalves, 2019), focusing on the importance of breastfeeding in the first hours of life. The bibliographic search was carried out in renowned academic repositories, including Scielo, PubMed and BVS/Lilacs. The descriptors used in the search included: Breastfeeding, Newborns, Neonatal mortality, Health Promotion, Pediatrics, Postpartum period, Maternal and child health.

The methodological protocol for the selection of bibliographic sources followed strict inclusion criteria, namely: full availability of the manuscript, language of publication restricted to Portuguese or English, time delimitation of publications between 2014 and 2024, relevance of the

title in relation to the established descriptors, and a careful evaluation through classificatory reading of the abstracts and full analysis of the texts.

On the other hand, the following exclusion criteria were established: articles with limited availability, requiring payment for access, titles divergent with the predefined descriptors, and content that did not present substantial relevance to the scope of the research. This methodological approach allowed a comprehensive and in-depth exploration of the specialized literature, providing a critical and reflective synthesis on the current state of knowledge about the importance of breastfeeding in the first hours of life.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

During the search process, a total of 359 pieces of evidence related to the topic were identified, distributed among the Scielo (27), PubMed (172) and VHL (160) databases. After the screening process, which included reading the titles and abstracts, the number of relevant studies was reduced to 84, which were fully evaluated. Among these, many presented outdated theoretical references, inconsistent evaluation methods, or consisted of revisions of other revisions, resulting in the final selection of 39 references that effectively contributed to the construction of this review.

THE IMPORTANCE OF BREASTFEEDING IN THE FIRST 60 MINUTES

The process of breastfeeding or breastfeeding consists of a natural physiological process, which can be observed in several mammalian animals, including humans, being one of the best ways to feed and protect newborns (NB). Reports of breastfeeding practices have been present in nature, accompanying man since the dawn of humanity (Cavaglieri; Balduino, 2022).

It is known that human breast milk is composed of several nutrients that are in exact amounts, so that the development of the human brain occurs properly (Feitosa; Da Silva; da Silva, 2020). In addition, human breast milk contains a variety of vitamins, human breast milk is a complete and adaptable food specifically designed to meet the nutritional and developmental needs of the baby, which distinguishes it from milk produced by other mammals (BRAZIL, 2015).

Breastfeeding in the first hour of life of the newborn is a crucial moment for the health and well-being of both mother and baby, as recommended by the WHO. This practice offers immediate and lasting benefits that profoundly impact the lives of both (da Silva *et al.*, 2022).

For this reason, exclusive breastfeeding (EBF) is recommended, which offers adequate nutrition for the child and promotes an affective bond between mother and newborn, influencing the health of both, especially the baby. In addition to providing adequate nutrition, SMA boosts the baby's immune system (Carvalho-Ramos *et al.*, 2018).

Breast milk is rich in water, vitamins A, E, and K, minerals, and a variety of bioactive components such as hormones, enzymes, and immunoglobulins. These nutrients are essential for the development and protection of the baby against infections, in addition to helping to prevent diarrhea, chronic diseases and the development of allergies (Da Silva, 2019).

Lactation occurs in three distinct phases known as colostrum, transitional milk, and mature milk (Porath Azevedo Fassarella *et al.*, 2018). Colostrum is the first secretion of the mammary glands, produced during the first week after delivery, and is characterized by having a volume ranging from 02 to 20 ml per feeding in the first three days of the newborn. Transition milk, which appears in the second week postpartum, serves as a transition between colostrum and mature milk, which begins to be produced in the second half postpartum (from Cunha; from Siqueira, 2016).

It is noteworthy that among the psychological benefits of early breastfeeding, the strengthening of the maternal-infant bond stands out, promoting an intense exchange of affectionate feelings such as love, affection and trust (Monteiro *et al.*, 2022). This emotional bond can be decisive for the maintenance of exclusive breastfeeding in the following months. In physiological terms, breastfeeding in the first hour of life, known as the "Golden Hour", plays a crucial role in the adaptation of the newborn to the extrauterine environment, contributing to the regulation of glycemic levels and the support of the baby's cardiorespiratory system (de Barros; Teixeira, 2022; Galvão, 2024).

In turn, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Brazilian Ministry of Health recommend that breastfeeding be exclusive in the first six months of the baby's life and complementary until 24 months or more. During the first six months of life, it is not necessary to introduce foods other than breast milk, as it is sufficient to meet the baby's nutritional needs (BRAZIL, 2015; WHO, 2018).

Offering liquids such as teas, juices and water together with breastfeeding can be harmful, resulting in a decrease in breast milk consumption and, consequently, a reduction in milk production. This can contribute to early weaning, which is a public health problem, due to the risks of infant mortality. It is important to maintain exclusive breastfeeding in the first six months of life and avoid offering other liquids or foods before this phase (Amaral, 2016; Joseph *et al.*, 2017).

The importance of breastfeeding has been discussed for decades and, since 1991, the World Health Organization (WHO) has recommended exclusive breastfeeding until the baby is 6 months old. This theme is relevant, as breast milk is essential for the nutrition and healthy development of the baby, in addition to offering protection against diseases and infections. It is important to make families aware of the importance of exclusive breastfeeding in the first six months of life and to encourage the continuation of breastfeeding until 2 years or more (WHO, 2003; BRAZIL, 2009).

As exposed in the literature, the theme is complex, because the practice of breastfeeding involves factors: family, cultural, social, psychic, biological, spiritual, environmental, among others, which make this practice more acceptable, or not, by the mother (Porath *et al.*, 2018). In addition, they expose that there must be stimulus/motivation, from practice by health professionals such as doctors and nurses, who are qualified to complement the mother's knowledge about how the correct latch on should be carried out for breastfeeding without problems (Amaral, 2016; WHO, 2018).

A pioneering and landmark study involving 10,947 infants revealed that breast milk administered on the first day of life prevented 16% of neonatal deaths (Edmond *et al.*, 2006). Notably, this rate could increase to 22% if breastfeeding was started within the first hour after delivery. In addition, breastfeeding in the first hour of life is recognized as an indicator of breastfeeding excellence (Edmond *et al.*, 2006; Smith *et al.*, 2017).

Colostrum, the first breast milk, is a rich source of antibodies, proteins, and defense cells that offer protection against a number of common childhood infections, such as diarrhea and pneumonia, significantly reducing the risk of neonatal mortality. In addition, its laxative properties help in the elimination of meconium, preventing complications such as jaundice (Halmenschlager; Diaz, 2020).

Early breastfeeding provides not only nutrition, but also adaptation to extrauterine life, which includes glycemic and thermal regulation of the newborn, helping to avoid hypothermia, cardiorespiratory, in addition to corroborating the stimulation of the maternal pituitary process that helps in the production of oxytocin and prolactin, hormones that increase the production and ejection of milk (da Silva *et al.*, 2022). Breast milk, in addition, provides glucose, the main source of energy for the newborn, helping to maintain stable blood sugar levels, essential for their healthy development (Halmenschlager; Diaz, 2020).

In addition to the physical benefits, breastfeeding promotes a deep affective bond between mother and baby, strengthening the emotional connection and contributing to the healthy emotional development of the NB (da Silva *et al.*, 2022). The release of oxytocin during breastfeeding also promotes feelings of love and well-being in both involved, reinforcing the affective aspect of this very special moment (Araújo *et al.*, 2021; Lima; Andreara de Almeida, 2021).

Brazil is one of the countries that has committed to improving the quality of care provided to pregnant women, postpartum women and newborns in order to reduce maternal and infant morbidity and mortality, among the strategies the promotion to increase the rates of exclusive breastfeeding (EBF), being a goal to be achieved (Chaves, 2013).

Exclusive breastfeeding can be defined as the child's diet composed only of breast milk, without any insertions of other liquid or solid foods, even though it is an isolated strategy, it is one of the strategies that most prevents infant mortality, in addition to promoting health in physical and mental aspects, being important to establish the bond between mother and child. In addition, it is

recommended that EBF occurs up to the first six months of life and that breastfeeding should be maintained for at least two years (WHO, 2018).

In turn, colostrum is the first milk produced by the mother, being nutritious and with a quantity of substances that provide protection such as antibodies in higher concentrations than in mature milk, which is the one that contains all the nutrients that the child needs to develop, are sufficient and suitable for babies, even in small quantities (Carvalho-Ramos *et al.*, 2018; Fan; Da Silva; da Silva, 2020).

Breast milk is an important source of nutrition for the breastfeeding mother, as it is composed of proteins, carbohydrates, fats, vitamins among other compounds that are essential for the child's development, giving it protection against allergic diseases, malnutrition, development of metabolic syndromes, obesity, caries, among others (Sousa, 2016).

In this sense, Brazil has been investing in encouraging breastfeeding since 1981, with the Institution of the National Breastfeeding Incentive Program (PNIAM), which is considered a model given the diversity of actions that begin with care in the basic health network(BRAZIL, 2015).

The act of breastfeeding should always be promoted by health professionals, since it is an important strategy in the fight against malnutrition and maintenance of maternal and child health, and the nurse is essential in this process because he monitors pregnant and puerperal women from the beginning of pregnancy (Sardine *et al.*, 2019).

THE ROLE OF HEALTH PROFESSIONALS IN PROMOTING BREASTFEEDING

The promotion of EBF today is a challenge for health teams, since the stimulus to breastfeeding has been less and less observed and replaced by commercial formulas using various artifices to adopt this approach by the family (Sardine *et al.*, 2019).

It is noteworthy that one of the main justifications for not performing EBF is the statement that breast milk is weak, which is not true based on the evidence already well elucidated in the literature, what occurs is a process of easy digestion, which leads the child to feel hungry more quickly (Da Silva, 2019).

Health professionals, especially doctors and nurses, play a crucial role in promoting breastfeeding, acting as the main agents of education and support for pregnant and postpartum women. Through antenatal consultations and postpartum visits, these professionals are responsible for providing evidence-based information about the benefits of exclusive breastfeeding, both for the mother and the newborn (Lustosa; Lima, 2020). They should clarify doubts, demystify erroneous popular beliefs and guide mothers on the correct breastfeeding technique. This educational process is key to empowering women by providing them with the knowledge they need to make informed and safe decisions about their children's nutrition (Viana *et al.*, 2024).

In addition to direct education, health professionals also play a key role in the implementation of health policies and programs that encourage breastfeeding. Initiatives such as the Kangaroo Method and the Stork Network, which promote actions that promote skin-to-skin contact and humanized care, are examples of integrated practices that involve doctors and nurses in creating a favorable environment for breastfeeding (Cloaks *et al.*, 2017; Nascimento *et al.*, 2018).

Conformable Willow (2022), health professionals in the neonatal pediatrics sector are also responsible for identifying and intervening in factors that may hinder breastfeeding, such as maternal health problems, difficulties in latching on to the baby, or lack of social support. In this way, they act not only as educators, but also as facilitators of a continuous support process that is essential for successful breastfeeding.

It is noteworthy that nursing is the main sector of the health area to receive training in approaches aimed at promoting exclusive breastfeeding, they are present in prenatal consultations and in the baby's clinic in primary care, educating mothers for correct care and raising awareness about the risks that can be triggered, such as early weaning and the insertion of other foods that are not suitable for the child and how this can affect the child's health (Amaral, 2016; Lustosa; Lima, 2020).

The demystification of myths and beliefs such as "weak milk", "that there is little milk", "the baby does not want to latch on", are some of the recurring reports that nursing professionals have to elucidate, so the professional must act in order to solve all doubts and ensure that the mother feels safe in this process and that they have confidence that breast milk is sufficient for their children (Rocha; Bastos; de Souza Pimentel, 2019).

One of the problems that always seeks to be avoided is the promotion of health education due to early weaning, since it can incur in a deficient nutritional status and compromise aspects of the child's development, mainly compromising their immune system and leaving them more susceptible to the development of diseases and disconnection with their mother (Pires *et al.*, 2021).

THE RISKS OF EARLY WEANING

Although there is enough scientific evidence to defend the promotion of exclusive breastfeeding until the first six months and to be maintained until two years of age, most children in Brazil and in the world do not receive breastfeeding based on this evidence, this is due to several factors, especially cultural ones related to misinformation and myths about breastfeeding (Pires *et al.*, 2021).

The main factors that corroborate early weaning are the family nucleus in which the woman is inserted, the conditions of education, the insertion in the labor market and the performance of health services in addressing the issue. In view of the importance of breastfeeding, weaning should

be carried out when the child is in full adequate conditions to accept it, not being only an option of the mother (Andrade; Person; Donizete, 2018).

Early weaning is related to physiological changes that interfere both in breastfeeding and in the desire to breastfeed. The lack of interest in breastfeeding can be related to poor posture or morphological causes, such as: the child has a small mouth or the mother's breast is large with a tense areola, which causes a flatter chest, making it difficult to latch on correctly; in addition to the delay in the development of the sucking reflex in some newborns (Rocha; Bastos; de Souza Pimentel, 2019).

The suspension of breastfeeding or early weaning can be considered acts of violence against the child, as it leaves him exposed to several consequences such as the risk of developing diseases and even dying due to deficits in his development. Therefore, it is of paramount importance for the health system and for maternal and child well-being to combat early weaning to reduce infant morbidity and mortality rates (Lima; da Silva Nascimento; Martins, 2018; Luiza *et al.*, 2022).

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In this narrative review, essential aspects related to breastfeeding in the first hours of life were addressed, highlighting the importance of effective health education. It is crucial that mothers are clearly informed about the benefits of exclusive breastfeeding, emphasizing that breast milk is capable of adequately nourishing the newborn for a prolonged period, without the need for supplements such as teas, juices or specific formulas, except in exceptional situations. These supplements, when introduced unnecessarily, can interfere with the natural breastfeeding process, compromising the baby's health and the bond with the mother.

The role of health professionals, such as doctors and nurses, is fundamental in the process of education and support for breastfeeding. Government programs such as the Stork Network Project and the Kangaroo Method are important examples of efforts to promote proper breastfeeding and humanized care. In addition, it is essential that the debate on breastfeeding be encouraged from prenatal care, especially in Primary Health Care, to ensure that pregnant women are well prepared. However, factors such as beliefs in myths or uninformed cultural practices can compromise exclusive breastfeeding, and it is necessary to combat them through correct information and continuous support for mothers.

The conclusion of this review reaffirms the importance of breastfeeding in the first hours of life as a crucial practice for the health of the newborn and the need for continuous and well-informed support for mothers. Health education and the active involvement of health professionals are essential pillars for successful breastfeeding, contributing significantly to the reduction of neonatal mortality and the promotion of healthy development.

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