

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Feeding practices and growth of infants: A cross-sectional study at a Primary Health Care Facility in Mangaung, South Africa

Elizabeth Margaretha Jordaan¹, Corinna Walsh¹

¹ Department of Nutrition and Dietetics, School of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of the Free State, Republic of South Africa; 0000-0003-0452-201X, cronjeem@ufs.ac.za; 0000-0001-5578-9246, walshcm@ufs.ac.za

Corresponding Author's Email: CronjeEM@ufs.ac.za

Abstract

Introduction: The foundation for optimal growth and development is laid in the first 1000-day period, where adequate nutrition is of utmost importance. Exclusive breastfeeding (EBF) for the first six months of life has been found to reduce infant morbidity and mortality. Despite this, poor infant feeding practices remain a challenge in South Africa, especially in resource-poor communities. **Methods:** A quantitative, cross-sectional study was conducted at the Mangaung University Community Partnership Programme (MUCPP) Health Centre in the Free State Province, South Africa. A convenience sample of 150 mothers/caregivers and their infants ≤ 6 months were included. Structured interviews were conducted, and anthropometric measurements were obtained using WHO standards. **Results:** At the time of data collection, 62% of infants were exclusively breastfed, while 34.7% were exclusively formula-fed. Significant associations ($p < 0.05$) were found between EBF and normal WHO Z-score classifications for weight-for-age, length-for-age, and weight-for-length at all measured intervals. Infants who were not exclusively breastfed showed a higher prevalence of undernutrition, including stunting, wasting, and underweight. **Conclusion:** Exclusive breastfeeding during the first six months postpartum was significantly associated with improved growth outcomes and reduced prevalence of malnutrition. Exclusive breastfeeding should be promoted, while education and targeted interventions should be prioritised for vulnerable communities.

Keywords: Infant feeding; breastfeeding; feeding practices; malnutrition; growth