

Increasing prevalence of breast-feeding

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Summary and conclusions

Two studies were performed to gauge the prevalence of and attitudes towards breast-feeding. Mothers delivered in one month in 1975 and in one month in 1977 were sent a questionnaire one month later to determine whether they were breast-feeding their babies; those that were received a second questionnaire at three months. The prevalence of breast-feeding increased significantly between 1975 and 1977, and in both periods primiparas were more likely to breast-feed than multiparas. A survey of mothers' intentions to breast-feed showed that there were no significant racial differences, but that 82% of women in social classes I and II intended to breast-feed compared with 54% in classes IV and V.

These results show that, although the level of breast-feeding was high in 1975, a campaign directed at mothers, doctors, midwives, and health visitors did increase the prevalence of breast-feeding.

Introduction

Despite strong official encouragement of breast-feeding its incidence and duration are disappointingly low in several different parts of the country.^{1,2} These poor results may discourage others who are considering trying to improve the prevalence of breast-feeding in their areas. We describe here a study of the prevalence in a population in which it is both high and increasing.

Methods

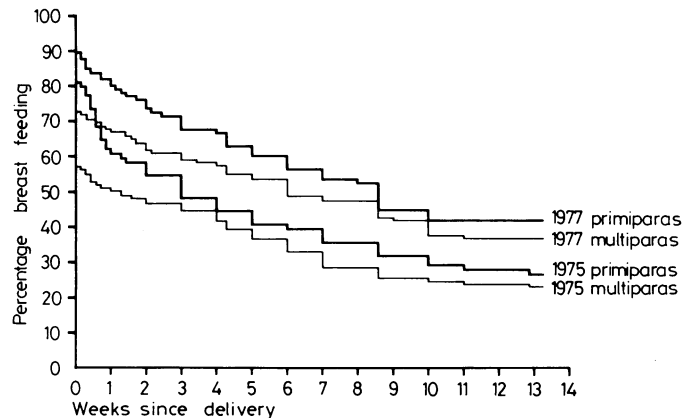
All women delivered in this hospital over a one-month period in May and June 1975 and in February 1977 were studied by sending them a postal questionnaire a month after delivery. Mothers who were still breast-feeding at one month were sent a second questionnaire at three months. Those who did not reply were contacted by letter, telephone, or personal visit.

A second study was performed, in which a dietitian (SC) spoke personally to all the mothers delivered within two weeks in 1975 and four weeks in 1977 on the postnatal wards shortly after delivery. The breast-feeding intention, race (from facial appearances), and husband's occupation (for social-class categorisation) were recorded.

Results

All 217 mothers in 1975 and all 252 mothers in 1977 replied to the one-month questionnaire. The only non-responders to the three-month questionnaire were two women who were breast-feeding at one month but then moved abroad.

The proportion of mothers breast-feeding with time is given in the figure. This shows a significant increase in incidence between 1975



Proportion of the population of primiparous or multiparous mothers in surveys who were breast-feeding their infants (totally or partially) up to three months after delivery.

and 1977 ($P < 0.001$) and between multiparas and primiparas ($P < 0.001$). The duration of breast-feeding also increased between the two parts of the study, with 42% of the primiparas and 37% of the multiparas in 1977 still breast-feeding at three months. The reasons given by primiparas for choosing bottle-feeding and those given by all who stopped breast-feeding were similar to those in the study by the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys.¹

The survey of the intention to breast-feed included 381 mothers and showed the expected social-class gradation in the proportion intending to breast-feed: 82% in classes I and II, 61% in class III, and 54% in classes IV and V. The social-class distribution of our population was unusual in that 40% of mothers were from social classes I and II compared with the national average of 19%.³ When our results were standardised for the social-class distribution of the British Births Survey 1970, the proportion intending to breast-feed was, however, lowered only to 62%. There were no significant differences in intention to breast-feed between races.

Conclusions

Recent pessimism about the low rates of breast-feeding in some populations is not appropriate for all groups. Although the prevalence of breast-feeding was relatively high in our district in 1975, it has since risen in association with a campaign among mothers, doctors, midwives, and health visitors. Our results, therefore, and those of others,^{4,5} show that both the incidence and the duration of breast-feeding may increase with appropriate encouragement, so it is worth while mounting campaigns directed at all relevant staff as well as at mothers.

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