

## Why Women Stop Breast Feeding in Occupied Palestine?

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### Abstract

**Aim of the study:** To explore the reasons why Palestinian mothers stop breastfeeding before 6 months of baby age.

**Methods:** A cross-sectional study was conducted in Hebron/Palestine that included mothers of all 420 live singleton newborns in the period between (January 1, 2022, and July 31, 2022). Mothers who did not initiate breastfeeding or who continued to breastfeed, either exclusively or with supplementation, beyond the first 6 months of life were excluded. The information about BF status at 6 months of baby age and reasons for stopping BF was collected by Public health doctors and midwives through telephone or face-to-face interviews when women visit the clinic for family planning consult.

**Results:** Of all the 420 participant mothers, 300 stopped breastfeeding completely before 6 months of baby age, among them, only 281 gave an obvious reason for stopping breastfeeding, (30%) stopped breastfeeding because of scanty milk production, (28.8%) child weaning him/herself, (24.8%) show that returning to work is the main cause, fatigue, and painful nipples were (8.4%) and mother preference was (4%).

**Conclusion:** This study highlights the reasons why women stop breastfeeding completely before 6 months. The results may help in identifying interventions to prolonged breastfeeding periods.

**Keywords:** Breastfeeding; Weaning; Lactation

### Introduction

Breast milk is very important for infants and mothers, it has established health, psychological, environmental, and other benefits, including cognitive development, and lowering the risk of infections, cancers, and diabetes in children and mothers [1], it is also considered to be the optimal food that enhances the growth and development of the infants [1, 2]. Breastfeeding (BF) should be continued for at least 6 months according to the Canadian Infant Feeding Joint Working Group [3-5]. Despite that many mothers choose to stop breastfeeding before 6 months of age for many reasons such as insufficient milk supply, infant self-weaning, return to studying, school or work and many others issues that related to the obstetrical and neonatal factors, infant age, lifestyle, mother's education, parity, level of income, stress factors and smoking [6-9]. BF contributes to the good health of mothers and babies as some research demonstrates [10] and so, the 'World Health Organization (WHO) and international bodies like United International Children Emergency Fund (UNICEF) set several guidelines that recommend and support mothers to breastfeed their babies for the first 6 months of age [11, 12]. Across-sectional studies showed that there is a decrease in BF rate from 89% in the second month, to 78% in the 6th month of babies' age [13]. And according to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) of Arab countries, the challenges of BF were; lack of education and policy support, inadequate training of mothers of health workers, marketing formula, returning to work, scanty milk production, sickness and diseases, and pregnancy [14]. As a part of the global efforts to promote BF, Palestinian hospitals try all the time to be Baby-Friendly Hospitals that support and educate mothers about BF to overcome these challenges. In this study, we will explore the reasons for stopping breastfeeding in Palestine.

### Methods

A cross-sectional study was conducted in Hebron/Palestine that included mothers of all live singleton newborns in the period between (January 1, 2022, and July 31, 2022). Mothers who did not initiate breastfeeding or who continued to breastfeed, either exclusively or with supplementation, beyond the first 6 months of life were excluded.

The information about BF status at 6 months of baby age and reasons for stopping BF was collected from 420 women enrolled in the study by Public health doctors and midwives through telephone or face-to-face interviews when women visit the clinics for family planning consult.

### Results

Study findings revealed that the mean age of mothers was 31 years, a majority had at least a bachelor's degree (60.7%), The family income average was (2000) shekel which was about (650) \$. Of all women who gave birth to a live singleton infant between January 1, 2022, and July 31, 2022, 420 women initiated breastfeeding and were breastfeeding at discharge from the hospital, and 300 women stopped breastfeeding completely before the baby was 6 months of age. Among those who were known to have weaned by 6 months, 281 answered about the study and

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were included. Of these 281 women, (30%) stopped breastfeeding because of scanty milk production, (28.8%) child weaning him/herself, (24.8%) show that returning to work is the main cause, fatigue and painful nipples (8.4%), and medical advice and mother preference (4%) (Table 1).

**Table 1:** The most common causes of stopping breastfeeding before 6 months of baby age

Cause	(%)
Milk production is not enough	30
Child self-weaning	28.80
Returning to work	24.80
Fatigue, diseases and painful nipples	8.40
Medical advice of formula	4
Mother preference	4

## Discussion

There are many factors associated with stopping breastfeeding before the 6 months of baby age as decreased, milk production, lack of training, and short maternity leave time which was discussed in the Behzadifar et al. 2019 systemic review [15]. Insufficient milk production comes from low mother knowledge about lactation and addressed crying as the main sign of hunger, so giving milk formula as the best solution [16]. Women were more likely to cite "fatigue with breastfeeding" as a reason for cessation (8.4%) in Palestine and (18.9%) in the Brown Canadian study [17]. Pain also was a major challenge proven by Ghana mothers [18]. Effective early training on the best way of lactation helps in increasing milk production and decreasing the pain and is crucial to avoid early baby weaning [19]. Some babies refuse breast milk as babies weaning him/her-self, this agrees with a systematic review study done by Zimmerman and his colleagues which confirmed that babies might prefer the bottles and reject breast milk [20]. The maternal choice for BF cessation in our study was following a secondary data analysis done by Michigan State University that highlighted some psychological distress issues [21]. Moreover, a cross-sectional survey done in Canada revealed that there is a strong mother's intention for short-duration of breastfeeding [22]. Breast milk is still the ideal food for infants [23]. Although the literature indicates that milk formula supplementation is negatively associated with breastfeeding duration it is not obvious which occurs first, whether breastfeeding problems lead to milk formula usage, or supplementation of milk formula occurs first that leading to breastfeeding problems [24].

## Limitations of this Study

Recall bias and the inability to generalize the results across all over Palestine.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

It is recommended that all Palestinian mothers should be trained in BF. The health care provider should improve mothers' confidence in the ability to breastfeed and enhance their knowledge of the importance of lactation before 6 months of baby age. Secondly, Policymakers also should implement guidelines in hospitals and clinics to overcome the challenges and

barriers of exclusively breastfeeding until 6 months of baby age in addition to prolonged maternity leave.

## Acknowledgement

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## Conflict of Interest

None.

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