

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on breastfeeding*El impacto de la pandemia de COVID-19 en la lactancia materna**O impacto da pandemia por COVID-19 no aleitamento materno***Israela Cristina Chaver de Aguiar¹**

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¹Universidade Veiga de Almeida. Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.²Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro. Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.³Hospital Universitário Pedro Ernesto. Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.*Corresponding author: E-mail: abilenegouvea@gmail.com**Abstract**

Given the spread of the COVID-19 virus, there has been great concern regarding breastfeeding during the pandemic. Therefore, there has been an increase in insecurity and protective measures regarding breastfeeding, due to uncertainties about its transmission and the safety of breastfeeding for mothers with suspected or confirmed cases of COVID-19. The aim was to describe the importance of breastfeeding and identify the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on breastfeeding practices. This is a literature review using the Virtual Health Library (VHL), LILACS, MedLine, and BDEF databases. The descriptors used were Pandemic and Breastfeeding. Five articles were selected for analysis. Nursing guidance on breastfeeding during the pandemic was a determining factor in adherence to exclusive breastfeeding, favoring the mother-child bond. The lack of information related to COVID-19, from pregnancy to the postpartum period, has had a significant negative impact and raised questions about breastfeeding among women who tested positive for COVID-19. It can be concluded that health education is an important tool for nurses, especially in obstetric care related to breastfeeding during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Descriptors: Breastfeeding; Pandemic; Infant Nutrition; Maternal and Child Health; Infant Health.**How to cite this article:**

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Resumén

Dada la propagación del virus COVID-19, ha habido una gran preocupación con respecto a la lactancia materna durante la pandemia. Por lo tanto, ha habido un aumento en la inseguridad y las medidas de protección con respecto a la lactancia materna, debido a las incertidumbres sobre su transmisión y la seguridad de la lactancia materna para las madres con casos sospechosos o confirmados de COVID-19. El objetivo fue describir la importancia de la lactancia materna e identificar los impactos de la pandemia de COVID-19 en las prácticas de lactancia materna. Esta es una revisión de la literatura utilizando las bases de datos de la Biblioteca Virtual en Salud (BVS), LILACS, MedLine y BDNF. Los descriptores utilizados fueron: Pandemia; Lactancia Materna. Se seleccionaron cinco artículos para su análisis. La orientación de enfermería sobre la lactancia materna durante la pandemia fue un factor determinante en la adhesión a la lactancia materna exclusiva, favoreciendo el vínculo madre-hijo. La falta de información relacionada con la COVID-19, desde el embarazo hasta el período posparto, ha tenido un impacto negativo significativo y ha generado preguntas sobre la lactancia materna entre las mujeres que dieron positivo en la prueba de COVID-19. Se puede concluir que la educación para la salud es una herramienta importante para las enfermeras, especialmente en la atención obstétrica relacionada con la lactancia materna durante la pandemia de COVID-19.

Descriptores: Lactancia Materna; Pandemia; Nutrición Infantil; Salud Materno-infantil; Salud Infantil.

Resumo

Diante da propagação do vírus da COVID-19, houve grande aflição em relação ao aleitamento materno durante a pandemia. Portanto, houve um aumento na insegurança e medidas de proteção em relação ao aleitamento materno, devido às incertezas sobre sua transmissão e a segurança sobre amamentação diante das mães com suspeita ou em casos confirmados com COVID-19. Objetivou-se descrever a importância do aleitamento materno; identificar os impactos que a pandemia COVID-19 teve na prática do aleitamento materno. Trata-se de revisão bibliográfica utilizando as bases de dados Biblioteca Virtual em Saúde (BVS), LILACS, MedLine e BDNF. Os descritores utilizados foram: Pandemia; Aleitamento Materno. Foram selecionados cinco artigos para análise. A orientação de enfermagem na amamentação no cenário da pandemia foi um fator determinante para a adesão ao aleitamento materno exclusivo, favorecendo o vínculo mãe-filho. A deficiência em informações relacionadas à COVID-19, durante o período de gestação ao puerpério, causou um grande impacto negativo e dúvidas sobre o ato de amamentar em mulheres que testaram positivas para COVID-19. Conclui-se que a educação em saúde é uma importante ferramenta do enfermeiro, principalmente na assistência obstétrica relacionada ao aleitamento materno em tempos de pandemia por COVID-19.

Descritores: Aleitamento Materno; Pandemia; Alimentação Infantil; Saúde Materno-Infantil; Saúde do Lactente.

Introduction

Breastfeeding alone can provide a child with satisfactory nutrition during the first six months of life. Breast milk is the most suitable food for children, not only due to its nutritional benefits but also its immunological benefits, which contribute to their development and healthy growth. It is one of the most important health-promoting practices¹.

Breastfeeding is one of the most important health-promoting practices, as human milk contains all the nutrients infants need for healthy growth and development. It promotes healthy child development and protects against respiratory diseases, chronic illnesses, infections, and dental malformations. Furthermore, breastfeeding helps create an emotional bond between mother and child and is a strategy for preventing various diseases².

The main benefits of breast milk include promoting immune protection, being adapted to the child's metabolism, protecting the respiratory tract and gastrointestinal tract against infectious diseases, adequate weight gain, being free from contamination, HIV, and some medications, in addition to stimulating the emotional bond between mother and child³.

COVID-19 is a rapidly spreading infectious disease that emerged in December 2019, with its epicenter in Wuhan, China. At that time, a group of patients with pneumonia of unknown origin was identified. Subsequently, respiratory tract cells were used to isolate this previously unrecognized virus. Initially called "2019 Novel Coronavirus" and later SARS-CoV-2, it was named after another epidemic that occurred around 2002/2003, caused by another coronavirus known as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). The virus is believed to have originated in a large animal and seafood market in Wuhan, China, as many of the first patients were linked to this market, further reinforcing the initial hypothesis that it was a zoonosis. When it became clear that other people in the region had become infected, even without contact with the market, it became clear that human-to-human transmission was occurring, and this eventually materialized in hundreds of countries. As a result, on January 30, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a public health emergency. In March 2020, the WHO declared this emergency pandemic, given the widespread spread of the disease in such a short space of time.



More than a year after the first case was announced, by April 2021, there were already more than 13.5 million cases and over 350,000 deaths. Fear of a healthcare system collapse generated global concern about public health management, which spurred the creation of a structure to contain and combat the pandemic. Following the first case in Brazil in May 2021, there was a rush to supply PPE, purchase respirators, and hire new healthcare professionals.

Given the spread of the COVID-19 virus, there was great concern regarding breastfeeding during the pandemic. In March 2020, the WHO raised concerns about society, particularly pregnant and postpartum women, as this group is at risk of acquiring respiratory infection due to the physiological state of pregnancy.

Therefore, there was an increase in insecurity and protective measures regarding breastfeeding, due to uncertainties about its transmission and the safety of breastfeeding for mothers with suspected or confirmed cases of COVID-19.

That said, the objective of this study is to analyze the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on breastfeeding and the question: "What impact has COVID-19 had on breastfeeding?" The objectives are to describe the importance of breastfeeding and to identify the impacts the COVID-19 pandemic has had on breastfeeding. This study is justified by the impact COVID-19 has had on the world, its

impact on breastfeeding, and the need for a more comprehensive approach to the topic, aiming to improve the quality of care and well-being of healthcare professionals, aiming to provide quality care not only to the woman in labor but also to the entire family, improving the quality of life of both mother and baby. The complex problems emerging from the pandemic require deeper discussion surrounding this critical moment in human existence.

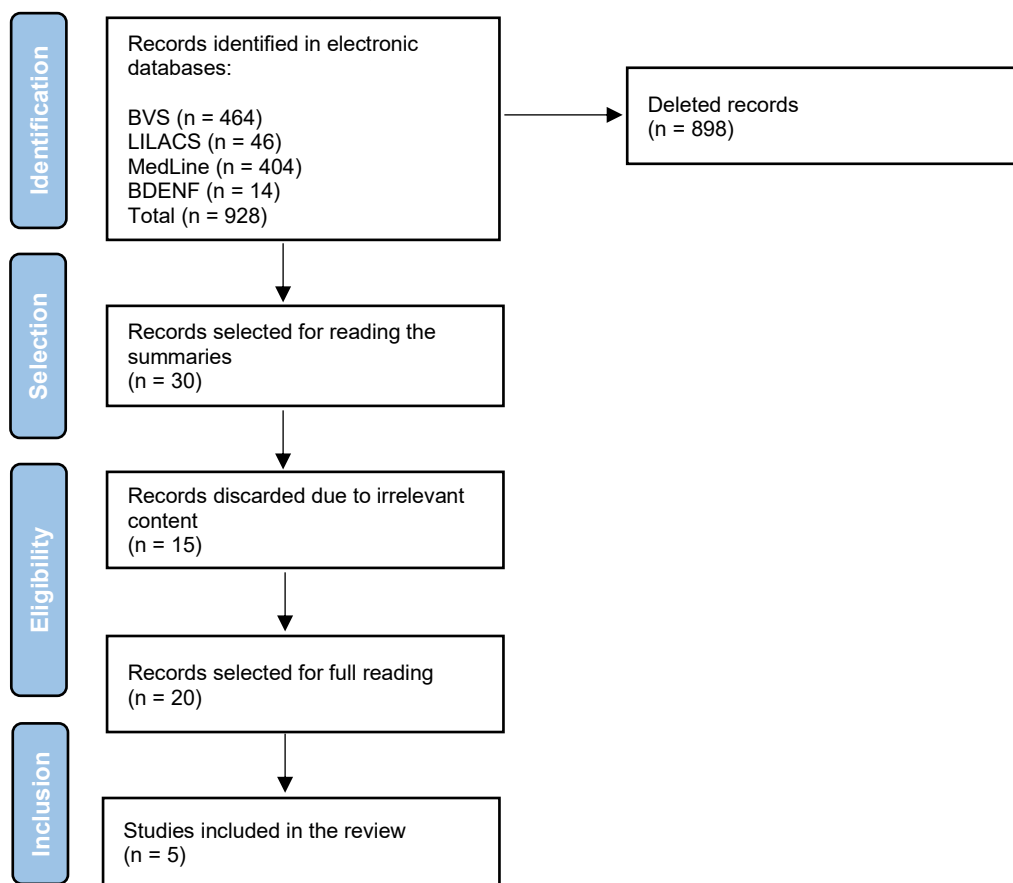
The study is expected to contribute to nursing research, expanding the existing body of research on the topic. Based on this, it may also contribute to teaching, providing opportunities for academics and other healthcare professionals to acquire new knowledge and develop new skills. Furthermore, in the healthcare field, the study is expected to contribute to improving professional ethics, enabling the establishment of practical and more humane reflections on the well-being of mothers and babies during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Thus, it is also believed that the study is relevant for society itself, since, based on the professionals' reflection, users can become recipients of more qualified care, with guaranteed continuity and dignity throughout the life cycle.

Methodology

In this study, we sought to answer the following research question: "What are the impacts caused by the pandemic on breastfeeding?".

Figure 1. Study search and selection flowchart. Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brazil, 2022



Only articles published in Portuguese in scientific journals with full texts freely available were used for data

synthesis. Case reports and experience reports were excluded. The databases chosen for the search were: Virtual



Health Library (VHL), Latin American and Caribbean Literature in Health Sciences (LILACS), Medical Literature Analysis and Retrieval System Online (MedLine), and the Nursing Database (BDENF).

The keywords were described in the search field, as follows: Pandemic; Breastfeeding. The searches were conducted between May and December 2022. The inclusion criteria were articles published in Portuguese and published in full in the last three years, and the exclusion criteria were: case reports, studies with methodological inconsistency, and duplicate articles in the databases. After full reading and evaluation, five studies were selected. Chart 1 presents the

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 five articles included in this study, distributed as follows:
 Author, Title, Year, Journal, and General Considerations.

Results

After reading the articles and books, a group analysis of the material was conducted, providing further insight into the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on breastfeeding. Immediately following the reading, a discussion was formulated, addressing the breast, factors such as the pandemic and/or COVID-19 that impact breastfeeding, and the advantages and disadvantages of breastfeeding, discussing its main challenges. Five articles were selected.

Chart 1. Summary of the main articles found in the database search. Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brazil, 2022

Author	Title	Year	Journal	General Considerations
Pinheiro, Josilene Maria Ferreira, et al.	COVID-19: desafios para assistência materno infantil e amamentação exclusiva no período neonatal	2022	Rev. Ciênc. Plur	The difficulties encountered during the pandemic may affect maternal health, the promotion of breastfeeding, and the quality of newborn food and nutrition.
Brito, Isabel; Sousa, Rita; Sanches, Bruno; Franco, João; Marcelino, Susana; Costa, Anselmo.	Alojamento Conjunto, Amamentação e Seguimento Neonatal de Recém-Nascidos de Mãe com COVID-19	2021	Acta Med Port	Newborns of mothers with COVID-19 may be roomed in and exclusively breastfed.
Silva, Bianka Sthefany; Chaves, Karoline Soares; Januário, Gabriela da Cunha; Baquião, Larissa Sales Martins; Gomes, André Tadeu; Morceli, Glilciane.	A amamentação em tempos da COVID-19: uma revisão narrativa	2021	Nursing (São Paulo)	There is still a scarcity of studies addressing this topic, especially in Portuguese. However, current recommendations currently encourage breastfeeding by nursing mothers with suspected or positive COVID-19, but with appropriate biosafety measures in place due to the benefits of breastfeeding.
Mascarenhas, Ana Pedrina Freitas, et al.	Orientação às lactantes acerca do aleitamento materno frente à pandemia COVID-19	2020	Espaç. saúde	Publications are important support tools for healthcare professionals, and they must maintain constant and relevant updates on the topic of care for pregnant women, postpartum women, and breastfeeding during the current pandemic.
Dantas, Ana Clara; Santos, Wesley dos; Nascimento, Anália Andréia de Araújo; Oliveira, Lorryne Alessandra Maia.	Refletindo sobre o contexto da amamentação durante a pandemia da COVID-19	2020	Enferm. foco	Breastfeeding is essential and should be encouraged, even during critical periods that generate uncertainty and fear. Healthcare professionals, especially nurses who are the primary link in promoting breastfeeding, should base their care on protocols, standards, and recommendations from recognized institutional bodies, thus promoting safe and qualified breastfeeding.

The analysis of the publications was based on concepts of qualitative and descriptive research approaches, in which we sought to evaluate and identify the variables cited in the reviewed articles, aiming to gather and synthesize results about the practices performed by nurses.

Discussion

Based on the analysis of the presented framework, two categories were organized: Breastfeeding and COVID-19 in breastfeeding practices. Through the analysis of the consulted articles, breastfeeding practices during the COVID-19 pandemic were identified. Although encouraging exclusive breastfeeding is a major challenge for nurses, many questions arose during the pandemic, and some of

these concerns can be minimized through systematic breastfeeding incentive actions. The reviews consulted confirm that, in addition to difficulties during lactation, when addressed in advance, they are easily resolved and lead to acceptable experiences for both the woman and the newborn, as breastfeeding provides a wonderful postnatal process, positively related to the newborn's nutrition and benefits for the woman's health. However, these difficulties were linked to COVID-19.

Breastfeeding

It has been observed that a lack of preparation for breastfeeding in postpartum women can lead to future breastfeeding problems. Problems such as mastitis and



nipple trauma, among others, can be avoided if the woman is properly instructed on appropriate breastfeeding and expressing milk. Breastfeeding is an action whose success depends on the cultural and psychological factors of the postpartum woman and the commitment and scientific technical information of the nurse in promoting, encouraging, and supporting breastfeeding⁴.

Breast complications are a major cause of early weaning, as they cause changes in the breasts of postpartum women. Studies have shown that these changes are biologically significant and reflect acceptable dietary guidelines for infants⁵.

It was also found through reading the selected articles that breastfeeding is heavily influenced by the woman's emotional state and the society in which she lives. Therefore, support from partners, family, health professionals, and society is essential for successful breastfeeding.

According to a study⁶, breastfeeding is a woman's right, but it should never be an obligation. It is something that must be developed, and guidance is essential to achieve this goal. Another important factor is that women, because they perceive breastfeeding as a natural method, do not identify breast problems as concerns that can hinder or prevent breastfeeding. They trivialize their symptoms and coexist with mixed feelings, such as displeasure, discomfort, and dissatisfaction.

COVID-19 in breastfeeding practice

According to a study⁷, highlighted in analyzing the impacts of COVID-19 on the practice of breastfeeding, in which the nurse who guides breastfeeding must clarify doubts, minimize taboos and prejudices linked to breastfeeding, since breastfeeding is not only a practice about breastfeeding but also breaks the taboos about the risks or not of COVID-19 between mother-baby contact during breastfeeding.

Therefore, authors⁸ highlight that the nurse's guidance is of great importance, as it contributes to the success of exclusive breastfeeding, seeking to clarify mothers about the importance of breastfeeding their children until at least the sixth month of life.

The nurse should recommend to this mother that, even when her child is separated, exclusive breastfeeding can be maintained through hand expression. This is crucial for prevention, protection, and child development; and early weaning can cause intestinal and immunological disorders, since breast milk is the baby's first vaccine⁹.

Nursing guidance on breastfeeding is a determining factor in adherence to exclusive breastfeeding, fostering the mother-child bond and providing benefits not only to the child but also to the mother, contributing to a healthier society. However, concerns about exposure to the virus could impact and harm breastfeeding, as in that scenario, there were benefits and risks to the practice⁴. Therefore, study⁷ emphasizes that the lack of information related to COVID-19, during the period from pregnancy to the postpartum period, caused a great negative impact and doubts about the act of breastfeeding in women who tested

positive for COVID-19, their mental and psychological health, and the challenges that guided them regarding the possible impacts that the pandemic caused.

Final Considerations

Based on the results, it is evident that breastfeeding brings a series of nutritional and immunological benefits to the baby, as well as contributing to strengthening the bond between mother and child, breaking the fear and insecurity that the baby brings.

The WHO recommends that babies should receive exclusive breast milk for the first six months of life. To meet their nutritional needs, children should continue to receive safe complementary feeding with adequate nutrients, in addition to breastfeeding, until two years of age or beyond. The Ministry of Health (1992) created the National Breastfeeding Incentive Program, which initiated a process of raising awareness among health professionals, emphasizing everyone's responsibility in promoting, encouraging, and supporting breastfeeding, in which breastfeeding should be exclusive and on demand until the sixth month of life. Among these professionals, nurses are the closest to these mothers and play an important role in health education programs, with their responsibility to guide and educate both pregnant women and postpartum women, as well as other health professionals¹⁰.

Breastfeeding is considered the best method of promoting and protecting health for all babies and has been recommended as the only food at the beginning of a child's life, as it meets all nutritional, immunological, and psychological needs. The nurse's contribution in encouraging breastfeeding during pregnancy is extremely important.

Encouraging exclusive breastfeeding is a major challenge for nurses, and some problems can be minimized through systematic breastfeeding incentives. Therefore, psychological, social, and physical factors encourage breastfeeding, as the mother needs to feel safe, balanced, calm, and especially have the support of a nurse to ensure adequate breast milk production. Instigating educational nursing initiatives, especially for adolescent mothers, is crucial to preventing early weaning. Guidance on proper breastfeeding techniques, deep mother-baby contact, and eye contact are important factors that facilitate breastfeeding. Eye contact provides the baby with security, and a correct latch prevents mastitis, nipple trauma, and discomfort during breastfeeding, facilitating feeding and providing comfort for both mother and baby.

Misguided guidance and practices regarding infant feeding, frequently practiced by public health professionals, are considered important factors in the erosion of breastfeeding. It's not enough for a woman to be well-informed about the benefits of breastfeeding and choose to do so; to pursue her decision, she must be placed in a breastfeeding-friendly environment and have the support of a qualified professional to help her. Therefore, breastfeeding should not be painful, as it can interfere with the mother-child bond and lead to early weaning. Because nurses are the professionals who interact most closely with postpartum women, they play an important role in health education



programs. Therefore, they must prepare pregnant women for breastfeeding, ensuring that the postpartum process of adapting to breastfeeding is easier and smoother, thus avoiding doubts, difficulties, and complications, in other words, encouraging adherence to exclusive breastfeeding.

Also noteworthy is the issue of public policies encouraging breastfeeding. For example, maternity leave is currently undergoing review, and a new law has recently been passed extending maternity leave to 180 days. The new rule only applies to female civil servants, and a law guaranteeing the benefit to private sector workers will soon be approved. However, the conclusion is that the

abandonment of exclusive breastfeeding could be significantly reduced, even in the face of COVID-19, if organizations were more aware of this, and public and private entities provided guidance and debunked the myths surrounding the possibility of infection simply through breastfeeding, thus ensuring greater safety during breastfeeding, even during a pandemic.

From this study, it is concluded that health education is an important tool for nurses, especially in obstetric care related to breastfeeding during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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