

HIV and Breastfeeding

The vertical mother to child transmission of Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) is one of the most tragic aspects of this devastating epidemic. Data suggests that around a third of the babies born to HIV positive mothers get infected(1). The issue of breastfeeding by HIV infected mothers has generated considerable controversy in this context. In developed countries, where safe alternative sources of milk are available and affordable, an HIV infected mother is recommended not to breastfeed her infant(2). According to the European Collaborative Study(3) the rate of HIV infection can be halved by not breastfeeding. A meta-analysis of several studies estimated a 14% incremental risk of HIV-1 transmission in breastfed infants born to HIV infected mothers(1).

The World Health Organization has recommended that in developing countries, where infectious disease and malnutrition are important causes of mortality early in life, HIV infected mothers should be encouraged to breastfeed their infants(4,5). This recommendation has been widely quoted in the Indian literature(6,7) and is likely to be implemented by our pediatricians and obstetricians.

The infant mortality rate in India is currently 80 per 1000, *i.e.*, 8%(8). Deaths due to gastro-intestinal infections account for approximately 20% of infant deaths. Therefore, 1.6% of infants die due to diarrhea related causes. We know that the risk of HIV transmission to infants, exclusively due to breastfeeding by HIV infected mothers is 14%(1). Since HIV is

uniformly fatal, the risk of death in these infants due to HIV alone would be 14%. If all infants born to HIV infected mothers were to be artificially fed, the incidence of diarrhea related deaths in these infants would probably increase beyond 1.6%. The incidence of infant malnutrition would probably increase as well. It is difficult to estimate the increase in mortality and morbidity in artificially fed infants compared to breastfed infants of HIV infected mothers in our country. Yet it would appear, that the risk of death due to artificial feeding would be substantially lower than the 14% risk of HIV as result of breastfeeding.

The decision regarding advising a HIV positive mother needs to be taken on an individual basis. Looking at the mortality statistics in our country, it is my opinion that most HIV positive mothers should be advised against breastfeeding their infants. The Indian Academy of Pediatrics needs to debate the issue of breastfeeding by HIV positive mothers. A formal guideline would help health workers make rational decisions.

Mahesh V. Balsekar,

Consultant Pediatrician,

Breach Candy Hospital,

Sir H.N. Hospital, Mumbai 400 026.

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