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## Islamic and Cultural Practices in Breastfeeding

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**FRANÇAIS**

**TÜRKÇE**

Breastfeeding is important to me for several reasons. One reason is my religion. As a Muslim parent, I always try to follow Islamic guidelines and I was fascinated to discover breastfeeding is mentioned in the Quran<sup>1</sup> (Islam's holy book). As I read more about Islam and breastfeeding, I came across some controversial issues and realized that many cultural practices get mixed and confused with religious practices.

As with any religion, some Muslims will adhere strictly to the religious teachings as defined by the Quran and Sunnah [sayings, practices and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad]. Other Muslims will take a more relaxed approach to the religion but may have heavy cultural influences. Helping Muslim mothers adopt good breastfeeding practices requires an understanding of the differences between the religious basis of breastfeeding and the cultural practices followed by some Muslims.

## **A MUSLIM VIEW OF BREASTFEEDING**

Most Muslims see breastfeeding as the God (Allah) given right of the child according to the rules of Shariah (Islamic Law). The religious laws regarding breastfeeding are all from the Quran and give parents a degree of flexibility and choice.

## **DURATION OF BREASTFEEDING**

Following the teachings of the Quran, Muslim mothers often aim to breastfeed their babies until the age of two years. This refers to the Islamic months—the lunar year—so it will be approximately 22 days before the child reaches his/her second birthday. However, it is not mandatory to breastfeed a child for two years if both the parents agree to wean the baby for a legitimate reason.

When Muslim mothers face breastfeeding problems, they may feel very disappointed and scared that they might not be able to reach their goal of breastfeeding for two years and often may experience feelings of guilt. Reassuring mothers that they tried their best is what counts and can be a helpful way to put things into perspective. In many modern cultures the duration of breastfeeding is much shorter, often ending after one year.

There is a huge variation in practice regarding the maximum age limit for breastfeeding, depending on which school of Islamic jurisprudence the family chooses to follow. The opinions of Muslim scholars fluctuate, but generally range between two and seven years. This means that any mothers who prefer a more natural weaning approach have the flexibility

to do so. In some cultures extended breastfeeding is frowned upon. For example in the sub-Indian cultures it may be acceptable for a girl to be nursed for longer, but not for a boy.

## **WEANING**

Weaning methods are heavily influenced by cultural practices in Muslim families, as there is no specific mention of how to wean in the Quran. Bangladeshi families may have a weaning celebration at six months when solids are first introduced by giving the baby six rice grains. In some African-Muslim tribal cultures (Hausa cultural belief), babies are expected to have water as well as breast milk from birth and mothers may even have their colostrum expressed before nursing their baby. Some India-Pakistan cultures also used to have this belief in the past. There is a vast range of practices within different tribal groups. In addition, breastfeeding while pregnant may seem strange and unacceptable in some cultures. Mothers may rush to wean their child if they become pregnant thinking that it is unsafe or that the milk will be spoiled.

## **TAHNEEK**

Soon after the birth of a baby, many Muslim families practice a religious tradition of prelacteal feeds known as “Tahneek”. This originates from the Hadith (sayings of the Prophet). Tahneek is the practice of softening a date and rubbing a bit of it on the hard palate of the newborn’s mouth with a clean finger. It is only the “taste of the sweetness” that is sought. Sometimes honey or cane sugar is used instead.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes it will be a close relative (usually the grandparents) who gives the baby this first taste and occasionally they may put a large quantity in the baby’s mouth not knowing the negative effects that this could have. A medical professional who knows about these practices can help to explain the dangers sensitively.

## **THE ISLAMIC FATHER’S ROLE**

In Islam fathers play an important role in breastfeeding. Many of the responsibilities of fathers are mentioned in the Quran. Key responsibilities

of a father include the following:

- The father provides moral support and encouragement.
- The father must provide the means to feed and clothe the nursing mother.
- The father must find an alternative milk source and pay the compensation in kindness if the baby's mother does not breastfeed.
- If the father dies during the nursing period, the maintenance cost of the baby should be borne by his heirs (usually the baby's paternal grandfather).
- Discussing and deciding weaning together with the mother is not a sin.

The fact that the father has to be the main person responsible for the finances is so important in Islam that even if a couple gets divorced, the father has to continue to pay for the mother's and child's expenses until the baby is weaned (within two years).

Although the father's roles are clear, in many cultures the father does not seem to get as involved. Instead, extended family members help the mother and baby and may often hire a maid for the early days. Co-sleeping is very common and in many cultures the father will sleep in a different room for the first few weeks.

## **WET NURSING AND ADOPTION**

Wet nursing was a common practice in pre-Islamic Arabia and at the time of the Prophet Muhammad. He was breastfed by his own mother and two different wet nurses.

If the mother is unable to breastfeed, she and the father can mutually agree to let a wet nurse feed the child. This demonstrates the preference in Islam of feeding the baby human milk instead of animal milk. This aspect of Islamic culture has been lost in most Western countries and many Muslim mothers in the West who have problems breastfeeding usually turn to formula milk without considering a wet nurse. However, in

Arab countries it is still widely practiced and Arab mothers may first look for a wet nurse within their extended families. See Milk Sharing in an Age of Social Media for information on LLLI milk donations policy.

Children who have been regularly breastfed (three to five or more times) by the same woman are considered “milk-siblings” and are prohibited from marrying each other. It is forbidden for a man to marry his milk mother (wet nurse) or for a woman to marry her milk mother’s husband.

Muslims who have adopted children may try their best to breastfeed the baby because under Islamic Shariah law, breastfeeding an infant three to five or more feeds when the child is under two years gives the adopted child the rights of a birth child. It also makes the child a mahram (an unmarriageable kin with whom sexual intercourse is considered incestuous). For a Muslim mother who wears the hijab (veil), this is usually very important to her since she is not required to veil herself in front of her adopted son when he reaches puberty, and this will give her more freedom.

## **DO BREASTFEEDING MOTHERS NEED TO FAST DURING RAMADAN?**

Ramadan is a month in the Islamic calendar when Muslims fast from dawn to dusk. However, those with sound excuses are exempt from fasting, until the reason for which they have been exempted has passed. When Ramadan falls in the summer, the fasts are very long and many mothers worry about how they will manage to fast and continue breastfeeding. However, pregnant and breastfeeding mothers are exempt from fasting according to the Hadith.

Some cultures interpret the Hadith very generally and will not fast at all if breastfeeding. In other cases and in Arab cultures in particular, mothers will only miss fasts in cases of hardship. They will often continue to fast during breastfeeding unless it has a negative effect on them or their babies. If they do not fast at the appropriate time, they will have to “pay back” the fast when they are able. Some mothers with children spaced

very close together will choose to make up the fast after all of their children have weaned. Some scholars say that instead of making up the fasts, these mothers can pay a compensation by feeding poor people a meal for the number of fasts missed.

If a mother feels that she is able to fast, then it is important to keep herself well hydrated by drinking lots of water between Iftar (breaking the fast at sunset) and Suhoor (starting the fast at dawn). Making sure she eats a nutritious Iftar and Suhoor meal and has plenty of rest during the day will ease the fast.

## **FEEDING IN PUBLIC**

An important aspect of breastfeeding in Muslim cultures is the mother's concern about her privacy and modesty when breastfeeding. Muslim mothers may worry about how they will feed in front of others without exposing their skin/breast. They may also have added pressure from relatives and husbands to cover up. In some cultures mothers feel uncomfortable with breastfeeding in front of people generally even if no skin is showing.

Having big families and frequent visitors in the early days can lead to disruption of breastfeeding because latching and positioning may need a good deal of attention. It is almost impossible to feed without showing a little skin and unfortunately for many Muslims this can pose such a difficulty that bottle-feeding seems like the easier option.

Once breastfeeding is going well, it becomes easier to cover up. There is a large variety of breastfeeding covers/aprons available to mothers to purchase or, if the mother wears a hijab, it may even be big enough to cover her baby. "Discreet" nursing can be challenging if a child totally refuses to be covered up. Wearing a loose nursing top can be useful in this situation.

Another problem arises if there are men around. Many mothers feel uncomfortable breastfeeding in the same room as men (and mahram

men) even if nothing is showing and baby is well covered up. There may also be a taboo about saying the word “breastfeeding” in front of men, depending on the cultural traditions of the family.

## **SPECIAL FOODS TO INCREASE MOTHERS’ MILK**

Mothers may be advised to take black seed (*Nigella sativa*) which is commonly known as “the blessed seed”. This is a very important herb in the Muslim community, as it is believed to have healing properties for most illnesses. Many Muslims take it as part of a healthier lifestyle (although it should not be taken during pregnancy). Black seed<sup>3</sup> can act as a herbal galactagogue.

Another food that Muslim mothers may be encouraged to eat during labor and post-partum are dates. This is because in a Quranic verse Mary was told to eat dates at the time of giving birth to Jesus.

Dates have high sugar content for that burst of energy that is needed after an exhausting labor. Dates contain many vitamins and minerals including iron and are high in fiber. They also contain substances that have similar properties to oxytocin, which is essential for the let-down reflex to occur.

In Egyptian culture mothers are given “mughaat,” which is a special mix of powdered fenugreek seeds with nuts fried in butter and sugar, to increase a mother’s milk. Mothers are also encouraged to have a lot of broth and soup post labor. In some African cultures certain herbs are rubbed on the breast to increase milk and in some regions mothers are given special diets for 40 days. Chile foods are usually restricted but one African tribe actually encourages the new mother to have plenty of chile in the belief that it will increase her milk supply. Again there is a huge difference among the various cultures. Bangladeshi mothers have their drinking water restricted in the first few days because it is believed that it will make them swell up, but in neighboring cultures the mothers are given plenty of water. Pakistani mothers are usually also given a dish or drink containing fenugreek seeds to help with milk supply.

There are many variations in the Islamic and cultural practices of Muslim mothers. Although this information is not exhaustive, I hope it will be useful to you when supporting Muslim mothers.

<sup>1</sup>Traditionally called “Koran” in English.

<sup>2</sup>Honey can sometimes contain spores of a bacteria that can cause botulism in babies; a very serious illness. Health authorities recommend against giving a baby honey until they’re 12 months old.

<sup>3</sup>Lactmed says “ Black seed has been used orally as a galactagogue in India; however, no scientifically valid clinical trials support this use.”

*McKenna, K. and Shankar, R. The Practice of Prelacteal Feeding to Newborns Among Hindu and Muslim Families Journal of Midwifery & Women’s Health 2009;54(1):78-81.*

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