

Fact Sheet 28 Cultural Beliefs about Breastfeeding and the Introduction of Solids

Use of Colostrum

Some cultures believe that the colostrum is not good for the baby. The origins of this belief are not well understood, and will vary between communities. Mothers may be advised to hand express the colostrum and discard it rather than feeding it to the newborn baby.

Many of the mothers participating in the Good Food for New Arrivals Project 2005-2008 from South Sudan, Congo, Burundi and Tanzania did not practice avoidance of colostrum and felt that this was good milk for the baby to have. Many mothers understood that this first milk was protective the baby against disease. Although immunology was not necessarily understood directly, the result was well accepted and understood.

Foods and Practices to increase milk supply.

Beliefs in relation to breastfeeding held by different communities are varied. For many cultures and communities the ability to successfully breastfeed a child is the difference between life and death for the infant. There are not the safe breast milk alternatives available that we have access to in Australia.

The cost of using formula long term for a child is prohibitive, even if there is access to a clean and safe water supply, which is often unusual.

Practices in relation to increasing milk supply vary from the food and drinks recommended for consumption to the application of pastes to the breast to enhance milk supply. In some cultures specific rituals may be conducted.

Findings from the Good Food for New Arrivals Project

Dinka of South Sudan - of all the Dinka women spoken to none avoided colostrum. There were no specific foods identified to increase supply of breastmilk

Congo – colostrum was not avoided and the infant was reported to be put on the breast immediately. One type of root vegetable (no translation) was believed to have some beneficial effects on milk production, Boiled and consumed as a broth it is thought to be beneficial.

Vietnamese – beliefs around hot and cold foods and foods that should be avoided during lactation were many and varied.

Introduction of solids

Debate over the correct age to commence introduction of solids has been ongoing for the last 5-10 years. WHO recommend introduction of solids at 6 months of age. It is accepted generally that solids should not be introduced prior to 17 weeks