

Ecological study of effect of breast feeding on infant mortality in Latin America

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Abstract

Objective To estimate the effect of exclusive breast feeding and partial breast feeding on infant mortality from diarrhoeal disease and acute respiratory infections in Latin America.

Design Attributable fraction analysis of national data on infant mortality and breast feeding.

Setting Latin America and the Caribbean.

Main outcome measures Mortality from diarrhoeal disease and acute respiratory infections and nationally representative breastfeeding rates.

Results 55% of infant deaths from diarrhoeal disease and acute respiratory infections in Latin America are preventable by exclusive breast feeding among infants aged 0-3 months and partial breast feeding throughout the remainder of infancy. Among infants aged 0-3 months, 66% of deaths from these causes are preventable by exclusive breast feeding; among infants aged 4-11 months, 32% of such deaths are preventable by partial breast feeding. 13.9% of infant deaths from all causes are preventable by these breastfeeding patterns. The annual number of preventable deaths is about 52 000 for the region.

Conclusions Exclusive breastfeeding of infants aged 0-3 months and partial breastfeeding throughout the remainder of infancy could substantially reduce infant mortality in Latin America. Interventions to promote breast feeding should target younger infants.

Introduction

The low prevalence and duration of exclusive and partial breast feeding increase the risk of infant and childhood morbidity and mortality in both developed and developing countries.¹⁻⁴ The risk is highest for diarrhoeal disease and acute respiratory infections.

Published studies of the effects of breast feeding have several shortcomings. Generally, researchers have analysed breast feeding as a dichotomous variable. Sometimes the breastfeeding group was not clearly defined or was inconsistent with commonly used indicators. Although the mortality risk of not breast feeding has been shown to be highly age dependent,^{1,5} most studies have not differentiated high risk infants from low risk infants.⁶⁻¹⁰ Consequently, it is difficult to quantify the benefits of exclusive breast feeding or to compare the effect of promoting breast feeding during early infancy with similar interventions targeted at older infants.

We investigated the potential of exclusive breast feeding during the first four months of life and partial breast feeding throughout the remainder of infancy to reduce infant mortality in Latin America and the Caribbean (henceforth referred to as Latin America). Our estimates take into account differing risk according to age and breastfeeding pattern.

Methods

Data on breast feeding

We obtained breastfeeding rates from recent nationally representative surveys for 16 of 36 countries in Latin America. With the exception of Cuba and Chile,^{11,12} country data were extracted from the demographic and health surveys from Macro International (Calverton, MD) or reports of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (references available from the authors). We calculated country level rates of breast feeding by age group as infant population weighted averages of age specific feeding rates. We calculated regional and subregional rates as infant population weighted averages of country rates. Infant population figures and subregional and regional classifications were based on those of the United Nations.¹³

For infants aged under 4 months (referred to as 0-3 months) the categories were exclusive breast feeding, partial breast feeding, and no breast feeding, and for infants aged 4-11 months (4 months to under 1 year) the categories were partial breast feeding and no breast feeding. Exclusive breast feeding means no other liquids or solids except vitamins, mineral supplements, or medicines. Partial breast feeding means receiving some breast milk, regardless of how much.¹⁴ We chose to analyse exclusive breast feeding among infants aged 0-3 months because relatively few older infants in Latin America are exclusively breast fed.¹⁴

Mortality data

We used attributable risk methods to calculate the fraction of deaths from diarrhoeal disease and acute respiratory infections that could be prevented by exclusive breast feeding of infants aged 0-3 months and partial breastfeeding during the remainder of infancy.^{15,16} Relative risks of death from these diseases for the feeding categories (table 1) were obtained from a reanalysis of published data² to match the age groups analysed (A Barros, personal communication). Except as noted below, data on all cause and cause specific child and

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Table 1 Relative risks of death from diarrhoeal disease and acute respiratory infections by age and breastfeeding category

	Exclusive breast feeding	Partial breast feeding	No breast feeding
Diarrhoeal disease:			
0-3 months	1.0	4.1	15.1
4-11 months	NA	1.0	2.2
Acute respiratory infections:			
0-3 months	1.0	2.9	4.0
4-11 months	NA	1.0	2.1

NA=not applicable.

infant mortality and of age distribution of child and infant mortality were regional estimates or other aggregates. We assumed that these estimates applied at country level.

In 1990, the proportion of deaths in children under 5 years old in Latin America from diarrhoeal disease was 18.4% and from acute respiratory infections was 14.1%.¹⁷ We estimated the proportion of deaths in children under 5 that occurred in infancy as the ratio of the country specific probability of dying before age 1 year and dying before age 5 years.¹⁸ Half of deaths from diarrhoeal diseases in children under 5 occurred during the first year of life, as did three quarters of deaths from acute respiratory infections.¹⁹ The proportions of infant deaths from diarrhoeal disease and acute respiratory infections occurring among infants aged 0-3 months were estimated as 0.62 and 0.75, respectively. Further details of the methods are available on the *BMJ's* website.

Results

The infant population covered by this study was 87.2% for the Caribbean subregion, 95.6% for central America, and 82.1% for South America.¹³ Table 2 gives the age specific breastfeeding rates by country, subregion, and region.

Table 3 gives age specific estimates of mortality from diarrhoeal disease that could be prevented by

Table 2 Age specific breastfeeding rates by country, subregion, and region

Geographical area	Age 0-3 months			Age 4-11 months	
	Exclusive breast feeding	Partial breast feeding	No breast feeding	Partial breast feeding	No breast feeding
Bolivia	0.60	0.38	0.02	0.90	0.10
Brazil	0.40	0.45	0.15	0.50	0.50
Chile	0.63	0.28	0.09	0.54	0.46
Colombia	0.16	0.80	0.05	0.66	0.34
Cuba	0.14	0.62	0.23	0.22	0.78
Dominican Republic	0.25	0.62	0.13	0.53	0.47
Ecuador	0.31	0.54	0.15	0.73	0.27
El Salvador	0.20	0.70	0.10	0.76	0.24
Guatemala	0.50	0.48	0.02	0.91	0.09
Haiti	0.03	0.94	0.03	0.92	0.09
Honduras	0.42	0.53	0.05	0.83	0.17
Mexico	0.37	0.37	0.26	0.51	0.49
Nicaragua	0.29	0.62	0.09	0.67	0.33
Paraguay	0.07	0.85	0.08	0.70	0.30
Peru	0.61	0.38	0.01	0.91	0.09
Trinidad and Tobago	0.10	0.73	0.17	0.42	0.58
Caribbean	0.13	0.74	0.12	0.58	0.42
Central America	0.38	0.42	0.20	0.60	0.40
South America	0.40	0.49	0.11	0.60	0.40
Latin America	0.37	0.48	0.14	0.60	0.40

breast feeding as both cause specific and all cause attributable fractions. Estimates of preventable mortality for infants aged 0-3 months ranged from 0.84 in Cuba to 0.57 in Peru. About half of preventable infant deaths from diarrhoeal disease occurred in Brazil and Mexico, the most populous countries in Latin America.

Table 4 gives estimates of preventable deaths from acute respiratory infections. Estimates for infants aged 0-3 months ranged from 0.66 in Trinidad and Tobago to 0.43 in Peru. Again, about half of preventable infant deaths occurred in Brazil and Mexico.

By calculating a weighed average of information from tables 3 and 4, we estimated that in Latin America 55% (90% confidence interval 36% to 66%) of infant deaths from both diseases are preventable by exclusive breast feeding of infants aged 0-3 months and partial breast feeding throughout the remainder of infancy (61% of deaths from diarrhoeal disease and 51% from acute respiratory infections). Among infants aged 0-3 months, 66% (48% to 76%) of deaths from both diseases are preventable by exclusive breast feeding (78% of deaths from diarrhoeal disease and 57% from acute respiratory infections); among infants aged 4-11 months, 32% (10% to 51%) of deaths from both diseases are preventable by partial breast feeding (33% of deaths from diarrhoeal disease and 31% from acute respiratory infections). In total, 13.9% (8.8% to 18.5%) of all infant deaths in Latin America are preventable by this pattern of breast feeding, which corresponds to 52 161 (33 098 to 69 320) deaths.

Discussion

Promotion of breast feeding is an important intervention for reducing infant mortality.^{6 20 21} Our analysis suggests that 13.9% of all cause infant mortality in Latin America (some 52 000 deaths annually) could be prevented by exclusive breast feeding of infants aged 0-3 months and partial breast feeding throughout the remainder of the first year. Most of the potential reduction in mortality is among infants aged 0-3 months. As the patterns of infant mortality differ between countries, child survival strategies might need to be tailored to specific groups or practices in different countries.

Accuracy of estimates

Our estimates are both conservative and liberal in some regards. We assumed that the excess risk of mortality is independent across the two infant age groups. However, if breast feeding improves long term nutritional status and immune functioning, children who are breast fed in early infancy may have a lower risk of death thereafter. On the other hand, we ignored competing causes of mortality. Some of the 52 000 infants a year who did not die from diarrhoeal disease or acute respiratory infections would die from other causes.

We assumed full compliance with the specified breastfeeding patterns. Shifting all infants to the described breastfeeding group produces the theoretical maximum possible effect. Studies in Latin America suggest that promotion of breast feeding can realistically give a 25% shift (moving a quarter of infants in each increased risk category to the corresponding no risk category).²²⁻²⁴ Such a shift would prevent around 13 000 deaths (a quarter of our estimate).

Table 3 Annual age specific mortality from diarrhoeal disease in Latin America that is preventable by exclusive breast feeding of infants aged 0-3 months and partial breast feeding for remainder of first year. Results are presented as attributable proportions of deaths from diarrhoeal disease and deaths from all causes

Geographical area	0-3 months		4-11 months		0-11 months		No of preventable deaths
	Diarrhoeal disease	All cause	Diarrhoeal disease	All cause	Diarrhoeal disease	All cause	
Bolivia	0.59	0.050	0.11	0.006	0.40	0.056	776
Brazil	0.78	0.052	0.37	0.015	0.62	0.068	9223
Chile	0.68	0.047	0.36	0.015	0.56	0.062	144
Colombia	0.76	0.053	0.29	0.012	0.58	0.065	1188
Cuba	0.84	0.067	0.48	0.024	0.70	0.090	103
Dominican Republic	0.79	0.052	0.36	0.015	0.63	0.067	546
Ecuador	0.79	0.074	0.25	0.014	0.58	0.088	583
El Salvador	0.78	0.054	0.23	0.010	0.57	0.063	365
Guatemala	0.63	0.062	0.09	0.006	0.43	0.068	767
Haiti	0.77	0.071	0.09	0.005	0.51	0.077	1271
Honduras	0.70	0.048	0.17	0.007	0.50	0.055	349
Mexico	0.83	0.058	0.37	0.016	0.65	0.074	3528
Nicaragua	0.76	0.070	0.28	0.016	0.58	0.085	407
Paraguay	0.79	0.054	0.27	0.011	0.59	0.066	285
Peru	0.57	0.051	0.09	0.005	0.39	0.056	1036
Trinidad and Tobago	0.82	0.059	0.41	0.018	0.67	0.077	13
Caribbean (90% CI)	0.80 (0.62 to 0.88)	0.067 (0.040 to 0.101)	0.33 (0.10 to 0.56)	0.017 (0.005 to 0.037)	0.62 (0.41 to 0.75)	0.084 (0.051 to 0.125)	2582 (1571 to 3826)
Central America (90% CI)	0.81 (0.63 to 0.88)	0.070 (0.041 to 0.103)	0.33 (0.09 to 0.55)	0.017 (0.005 to 0.038)	0.62 (0.40 to 0.74)	0.087 (0.052 to 0.127)	8435 (5017 to 12 321)
South America (90% CI)	0.75 (0.42 to 0.86)	0.053 (0.025 to 0.081)	0.33 (0.10 to 0.55)	0.014 (0.004 to 0.031)	0.59 (0.31 to 0.73)	0.067 (0.034 to 0.102)	15 620 (7937 to 23 887)
Latin America (90% CI)	0.78 (0.51 to 0.87)	0.056 (0.030 to 0.085)	0.33 (0.09 to 0.55)	0.014 (0.004 to 0.032)	0.61 (0.35 to 0.73)	0.071 (0.039 to 0.106)	26 590 (14 485 to 39 673)

Table 4 Annual age specific mortality from acute respiratory infections in Latin America that is preventable by by exclusive breast feeding of infants aged 0-3 months and partial breast feeding for remainder of first year. Results are presented as attributable proportions of deaths from acute respiratory infection and deaths from all causes

Geographical area	0-3 months		4-11 months		0-11 months		No of preventable deaths
	Acute respiratory infection	All cause	Acute respiratory infection	All cause	Acute respiratory infection	All cause	
Bolivia	0.44	0.052	0.10	0.004	0.35	0.056	776
Brazil	0.56	0.053	0.35	0.011	0.51	0.064	8707
Chile	0.45	0.043	0.34	0.011	0.42	0.053	124
Colombia	0.62	0.060	0.27	0.009	0.53	0.069	1261
Cuba	0.65	0.072	0.46	0.017	0.61	0.089	102
Dominican Republic	0.61	0.056	0.34	0.010	0.54	0.067	544
Ecuador	0.60	0.077	0.23	0.010	0.51	0.087	578
El Salvador	0.62	0.059	0.21	0.007	0.52	0.066	381
Guatemala	0.49	0.067	0.09	0.004	0.39	0.071	801
Haiti	0.65	0.084	0.09	0.004	0.51	0.088	1455
Honduras	0.53	0.051	0.16	0.005	0.44	0.056	355
Mexico	0.60	0.058	0.35	0.011	0.54	0.070	3321
Nicaragua	0.59	0.075	0.26	0.011	0.51	0.086	411
Paraguay	0.65	0.062	0.25	0.008	0.55	0.070	305
Peru	0.43	0.054	0.09	0.004	0.34	0.057	1053
Trinidad and Tobago	0.66	0.065	0.39	0.013	0.59	0.078	14
Caribbean (90% CI)	0.64 (0.53 to 0.73)	0.075 (0.050 to 0.093)	0.32 (0.08 to 0.54)	0.012 (0.003 to 0.028)	0.56 (0.39 to 0.66)	0.087 (0.059 to 0.111)	2659 (1803 to 3394)
Central America (90% CI)	0.58 (0.45 to 0.69)	0.071 (0.045 to 0.089)	0.31 (0.08 to 0.54)	0.012 (0.003 to 0.029)	0.52 (0.35 to 0.63)	0.083 (0.053 to 0.108)	8013 (5129 to 10 413)
South America (90% CI)	0.56 (0.42 to 0.66)	0.054 (0.035 to 0.070)	0.31 (0.08 to 0.54)	0.010 (0.003 to 0.023)	0.50 (0.32 to 0.61)	0.064 (0.042 to 0.085)	15 038 (9787 to 19 882)
Latin America (90% CI)	0.57 (0.44 to 0.68)	0.058 (0.037 to 0.074)	0.31 (0.08 to 0.54)	0.010 (0.003 to 0.024)	0.51 (0.33 to 0.62)	0.068 (0.044 to 0.089)	25 571 (16 626 to 33 388)

Our estimates of the proportions of infant deaths from diarrhoeal disease and acute respiratory infections occurring during the first four months of life are consistent with observations of age and cause specific mortality in children¹⁹⁻²⁵ and results from population based survivorship models.²⁶⁻²⁷ Although the figures are likely to be good approximations at the regional and subregional level, possible variation across

countries is ignored. The relative risks of death associated with feeding category may also be subject to regional variation.

Cultural differences in ideas about breast feeding should not seriously affect the analysis. Since the demographic and health surveys collect data using internationally accepted indicators, assignment to feeding category does not rely primarily on respondents' under-

What is already known on this topic

Infant mortality is lower among breast fed than non-breast fed infants

The reductions are greatest for deaths from diarrhoeal disease and acute respiratory infections

What this study adds

Exclusive breast feeding of infants aged 0-3 months and partial breast feeding for the remainder of the first year would prevent about 52 000 infant deaths a year in Latin America

This corresponds to 13.9% of infant deaths from all causes

Promotion of breast feeding has an important role in increasing survival of infants

standing of breast feeding but on detailed questions about food and fluid intake.

Implications

Our data are useful for comparing promotion of breast feeding with other child survival strategies. Although our methods are suitable for global analysis, we selected Latin America because it had the highest availability of data. Improved breastfeeding rates are likely to have less effect in areas where higher proportions of infants are breast fed (such as rural Africa) and more effect in areas where early weaning is common (such as South East Asia). Nevertheless, since exclusive breast feeding remains uncommon in many countries, improving rates of exclusive breast feeding in early infancy would probably substantially reduce infant mortality worldwide.

Our analysis suggests that interventions to promote breast feeding should particularly target younger infants and focus on exclusive breast feeding. Programmes such as the Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative have been important in improving the rates of successful initiation of exclusive breast feeding.²⁸ The challenge is to provide adequate and comprehensive support to mothers so that they can continue exclusive breast feeding while coping with the demands and strains of daily life.²⁹

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Endpiece Physicians

But nothing is more estimable than a physician who, having studied nature from his youth, knows the properties of the human body, the diseases which assail it, the remedies which will benefit it, exercises his art with caution, and pays equal attention to the rich and the poor.

Voltaire

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