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Overcoming Perceptions of Colic and Increasing Support to Improve Exclusive Breastfeeding Practices in Tanzania: Household Trials with Mothers and Fathers

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Objective: In Tanzania, exclusive breastfeeding (EBF) declines sharply from 84% in the first 2 months to 27% in the 5th and 6th months. Effective EBF promotion strategies are needed to improve child nutrition and survival. Our research explored barriers and facilitators to EBF in rural Tanzania and assessed parents' willingness to adopt and support recommended breastfeeding practices.

Methods: Qualitative trials of improved practices (TIPs) were conducted in 36 households with infants <6 months in 2 regions. Fathers participated in preliminary focus group discussions on ways to support breastfeeding. Fathers and mothers were individually interviewed 2 and 3 times, respectively, on willingness to try new behaviors and their actual practice. Data were analyzed thematically to identify barriers and facilitators to behavior change and strategies for engaging men to support improving breastfeeding practices.

Results: Common barriers to EBF were (1) parental concerns about colicky infants and use of commercial and/or traditional medicines to treat symptoms of crying or abdominal pain, (2) perceived thirst, for which infants were given water, and (3) women's heavy workloads and time away from their infants, limiting time available for EBF. Although several mothers expressed concerns about breastmilk sufficiency, few were giving other foods. After counseling, most mothers were EBF and breastfeeding more frequently. Fathers saw their roles as providing food to mothers to ensure sufficient breastmilk, and encouraging recommended trial practices. Even if willing to help with household chores, fathers reported barriers, including normative gender roles and their work away from home. While a few fathers helped reduce their wives' workloads, most provided emotional support or encouraged others to help with chores. Some fathers also soothed crying babies. Several couples reported that as a result of TIPs, their interpersonal communication had improved and helped support EBF.

Conclusion: Messages to promote EBF need to address concerns about colic and crying, and help parents develop effective soothing techniques and avoid use of non-prescribed medicines. Engaging men in EBF interventions is acceptable and could help change social norms and facilitate men's involvement in improving breastfeeding practices.