

Breastfeeding According to the Perspectives of Islamic Law and Science

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Abstract

The birth of a child is the most awaited moment for all married couples. A child serves as a bond of love and a continuation of lineage that needs to be nurtured and educated properly. One important aspect that parents should pay attention to is healthy food, ensuring that their children grow up perfectly. The best food for a baby is breast milk. Many studies have been conducted by both local and international researchers demonstrating the nutritional of breast milk. This article will discuss the perspectives of Islamic law and science regarding breastfeeding. Data for this study were collected using document analysis methods and analyzed through content analysis techniques. The findings indicate that breastfeeding is very important and provides numerous benefits to both child and mother. The advantages of breastfeeding are recognized by both Islamic law and science.

Keywords: Breast Milk, Islamic Law, Science.

Introduction

A mother is naturally bestowed by Allah with breast milk immediately after giving birth. Breast milk contains the nutrients that meet the needs of a baby. Numerous studies and findings, both in Islam and health sciences have proven the benefits of breastfeeding. Explanations regarding the laws of breastfeeding, the duration of breastfeeding, and the effects of breastfeeding in the Quran, Hadith, and the writings of scholars demonstrate that Islam places great importance on breastfeeding. This article aims to elaborate in detail on the views of Islam and science regarding breastfeeding.

Methodology

This article is written based on a study that uses a qualitative approach. Data in this writing were collected using the document analysis method. The data were analyzed using content analysis methods.

Breastfeeding in the Quran and Hadith

The practice of breastfeeding is given significant attention in Islam. Several verses of the Quran clearly encourage breastfeeding children with maternal milk, and the laws and regulations regarding breastfeeding are also outlined in other verses.

In Surah Al-Baqarah, verse 233, Allah SWT says:

“Mothers may breastfeed their children two complete years for whoever wishes to complete the nursing [period]...”

This verse emphasizes that the recommended duration of breastfeeding in Islam is two years, which is an ideal period for the growth and development of the baby. This two-year period is also recognized by health experts (WHO, 2003). Mothers are advised to exclusively breastfeed their children for at least six months, and it is highly encouraged to continue breastfeeding until the child is two years old. In addition, this verse grants mothers the right to decide on the duration of breastfeeding, whether it is less than or up to two years (al-Khin et al., 1992). The World Health Organization (WHO) and the Ministry of Health Malaysia recommend that infants be exclusively breastfed without any additional food or drink during the first six months. Breast milk contains all the necessary nutrients for the baby during this period, and there is no need for formula, water, or solid food.

Allah SWT also says in Surah Luqman, verse 14:

“And We have commanded people to ‘honour’ their parents. Their mothers bore them through hardship upon hardship, and their weaning takes two years. So be grateful to Me and your parents. To Me is the final return.”

The above verse also clarifies that the recommended duration for mothers to breastfeed their children in Islam is two years. This period is considered the most suitable because the nutrients contained in breast milk align with the nutritional needs of an infant.

Meaning: Let them live where you live ‘during their waiting period’, according to your means. And do not harass them to make their stay unbearable. If they are pregnant, then maintain them until they deliver. And if they nurse your child,1 compensate them, and consult together courteously. But if you fail to reach an agreement, then another woman will nurse ‘the child’ for the father.

(Surah al-Talaq, 65:6)

The above verse serves as evidence that breastfeeding a child for a full two years is not an obligation, but rather a right of the mother. The father, on the other hand, is responsible for providing compensation to his wife or ex-wife who breastfeeds their child if she requests it (al-Zuhayli, 2007). Several hadith also address the topic of breastfeeding, with many discussing the establishment of mahram relationships resulting from breastfeeding and the rule of three full feedings.

From Aisha R.Anha, she said:

Meaning: *"Breastfeeding makes the child of the breastmilk forbidden to marry, just like a child who is born."*

Sahih Bukhari (2553) and Sahih Muslim (4144).

Similarly, in a hadith from Ibn Abbas RA:

Meaning: The Prophet SAW said to the daughters of Hamzah RA, "They are not lawful for me. What is prohibited due to lineage is also prohibited due to breastfeeding. They are my foster daughters."

Sahih Bukhari (2502) and Sahih Muslim (1447).

The Ruling on Breastfeeding Beyond Two Years

In the previously discussed verse, it is understood that Islam strongly encourages breastfeeding from the time of birth until the child reaches the age of two years. However, a question arises regarding the ruling if a child continues to receive breast milk even after the age of two. Scholars have discussed this issue, and most agree that breastfeeding a child over the age of two is permissible in Islam, provided that it does not harm the child's health and there is mutual consent from both parents.

According to al-Qurtubi (1964): "An extension beyond the two-year period or a reduction is permitted as long as it does not harm the child and is done with the consent of both parents." Meanwhile, according to al-Jauziyyah (1988): "It is permissible for a mother to continue breastfeeding after two years, up to half of the third year or even longer."

Prof. Dr. Wahbah al-Zuhaili Rahimahullah mentioned in *al-Fiqh al-Islami wa Adillatuh*: *"If breastfeeding continues after two years due to the child's weakness, then there is no objection to it because of necessity. However, the ruling of mahram does not apply anymore due to breastfeeding, and the mother who is divorced cannot demand compensation."*

As a conclusion, it is permissible for parents to continue breastfeeding children over the age of two, provided that it does not harm the child. Breastfeeding should not be limited to breast milk alone; it should also include a balanced diet to ensure healthy growth and should be done out of necessity. The best approach is for parents to consult pediatric specialists to seek their advice on the health effects of breastfeeding beyond the age of two.

Nursing Mother of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW)

For mothers who are unable to breastfeed their own children, it is permissible for them or the father to hire someone else to breastfeed. The father is responsible for paying the wages to the nursing mother. Allah SWT says:

Meaning: *"Let them live where you live during their waiting period, according to your means. And do not harass them to make their stay unbearable. If they are pregnant, then maintain them until they deliver. And if they nurse your child,1 compensate them, and consult together courteously. But if you fail to reach an agreement, then another woman will nurse the child for the father."*

(al-Talaq: 6)

The Prophet Muhammad (SAW) himself was breastfed by a nursing mother named Halimah Al-Sa'diyah. The Arab society of the past practiced the custom of hiring nursing mothers who lived in rural areas to expose the child to a more challenging environment, which helped to develop their intellect and character (al-Khudari, 1988).

There were several other women who breastfed the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) during his childhood, but Halimah Al-Sa'diyah is the most remembered because the Prophet was under her care for a long significant period.

Halimah as-Sa'diyah

Halimah as-Sa'diyah comes from the Bani Sa'd tribe, an Arab tribe known for their proficiency in the Arabic language and their desert lifestyle. According to Arab traditions of that time, children from noble and honorable families were often sent to the countryside to be nursed by women from Bedouin tribes. This was to ensure that these children grew up in a healthy environment and learned the pure and eloquent Arabic language.

When Halimah as-Sa'diyah and her husband, Harith bin Abdul 'Uzza, came to Makkah to seek a child to nurse, they were a poor couple. However, after taking the Prophet Muhammad SAW as their nursing child, their lives transformed to be better. Their fortune increased, the milk from their livestock overflowed, and their lives became more prosperous.

Halimah as-Sa'diyah cared for the Prophet Muhammad SAW for about four to five years. He was raised in a rural environment, and Halimah as-Sa'diyah loved him as he is her own child. During his time under the care of Halimah as-Sa'diyah, an extraordinary incident known as the "cleaving of the chest" occurred. Jibril came and split open the chest of the Prophet Muhammad SAW, cleansing his heart with Zamzam water and removing what is referred to as the "part of the devil." This was one of the early signs of his prophethood. (Ibn-Hisham, n.d.)

After this incident, Halimah as-Sa'diyah became concerned for the safety of the Prophet and decided to return him to his biological mother, Aminah.

Although the Prophet Muhammad SAW was returned and grow up in Makkah, he never forgot Halimah as-Sa'diyah and her family. He would often visit Halimah as-Sa'diyah and always honored her as a nursing mother who played a significant role in his life.

In Islamic tradition, a nursing mother is considered as "second mother" to the child she breastfeeds. This is because breastfeeding is believed to establish a familial bond recognized by Islamic law, including in the matters of those who are not permitted to marry(mahram) and marriage.

Breastfeeding According to Health Science

From the health science perspective, breast milk is recognized as the best food for infants, especially during the first six months of life. This is because breast milk influences both the physical and mental development of children. Immediately after giving birth, a mother is provided with the first milk, which is yellowish in color and known as colostrum. Colostrum contains high levels of antibodies and acts as the first form of immunization for infants. Studies have shown that colostrum can help combat various diseases such as diarrhea,

bronchitis, eczema, and asthma. On the first day after childbirth, mothers are encouraged not to skip breastfeeding to ensure that their infants receive adequate antibodies.

The benefits of breast milk have been proven through studies by experts in health science. Breast milk contains antibodies that can protect infants from infections. Babies who are breastfed experience fewer cases of diarrhea and other illnesses compared to those who are given formula milk. (Diarrhea: Signs of Diarrhea in Infants, Causes of Diarrhea in Infants & Types of Diarrhea in Infants, <https://my.theasianparent.com/bayi-cirit-birit>). Breast milk also supports optimal brain development in infants, as it contains proteins, fats, and various nutrients essential for the growth of brain cells (Consumer Association of Penang 1990). In addition to benefits for the baby, mothers also gain significant advantages from breastfeeding. Among these is protection against breast cancer. Breastfeeding helps the uterus return to its normal size more quickly. For mothers looking to lose weight, breastfeeding is one of the best and most effective method (Arini, 2013).

Breast milk contains several anti-infective factors that help protect infants from various types of infections (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2012). Among the most important anti-infective factors found in breast milk are:

1. Lactoferrin which binds with iron to prevent the proliferation of intestinal bacteria (Universiti Sains Malaysia, n.d.). This lactoferrin also facilitates iron absorption in infants (Awang, n.d.).
2. Immunoglobulin (IgA) and white blood cells that act against pathogens in the body. They are present in colostrum, which serves as the first vaccine that should be given to infants to combat bacteria and viruses (Universiti Sains Malaysia, n.d.). Immunoglobulin is an antibody that prevents various diseases until the infant can develop their own antibodies, thereby indirectly helping to keep the mother's intestines free from bacteria (Awang, n.d.).
3. Proteins, vitamins A, C, and E function to protect infants from infections and eye diseases (Universiti Sains Malaysia, n.d.). The protein in breast milk is sufficient for the growth of infants and brain development. The uniqueness of the protein in breast milk is that it is easily digestible and absorbed compared to cow's milk. When cow's milk is given to infants, the quantity of protein that is digested and absorbed is low, resulting in a high level of protein breakdown products. Consequently, brain development may be disrupted if the levels of these breakdown products in the blood are high. Breast milk also does not place a burden on the infant's kidneys and does not require the storage of excess water (Awang, n.d.).
4. The lipase enzyme contained in breast milk can digest fats. The fat changes during breastfeeding, with fat being lower at the beginning of feeding (foremilk) and higher at the end of feeding (hindmilk), also known as final milk. The enzymes in breast milk digest fats and make them readily available to the infant as energy (Awang, n.d.).
5. Anti-inflammatory agents that protect infants from experiencing severe inflammatory effects.
6. Maternal antibodies can be passed to infants through breastfeeding. A study conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the United States found that infants who are breastfed receive antibodies from their mothers that protect them from infections (Universiti Sains Malaysia, n.d.).

In addition to protecting against infections, exclusive breastfeeding can reduce the risk of allergic diseases such as asthma and eczema. The risk of diabetes during adolescence and

obesity is also lower in breastfed infants. Furthermore, the lactose in breast milk can help prevent rickets.

Conclusion

Breastfeeding is not only a scientifically recognized practice but also a form of worship that holds a special place in Islamic teachings. From an Islamic perspective, it is a right of the infant and an obligation for capable mothers. From a scientific perspective, breastfeeding has been shown to provide various benefits for the physical health and mental development of the infant, as well as health benefits for the mother.

With the right guidance, along with support from the community and family, breastfeeding can be successfully implemented, providing long-term benefits for both the infant and the mother in terms of health and well-being. This demonstrates that breastfeeding is an invaluable gift from both religious and scientific perspectives.

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