

Awareness Regarding Indigenous Use of Food for Maternal Health Care

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KEYWORDS Awareness. Indigenous Foods. Maternal Health

ABSTRACT The health of the future generations depend upon the health of the mother, especially so during the pre and post delivery period. Indigenous methods and materials have been used since ages to take care of the women during these crucial times. The present study is an attempt to determine the awareness of the rural women regarding the properties of some selected foods in terms of their effectiveness for maternal health care. The data collected from three districts of Punjab (India) during the year 2002-2003 using a structured interview schedule revealed that majority of the respondents had low level of education but they were aware of the properties due to which the foods were used for maternal health care. Many properties of Asafoetida (*Ferula asafoetida*), Blankultthi (*Cassia absus*), Chunga (*Symplocos cochinchinensis*), Cumin seeds (*Cuminum cyminum*) and Poppy seeds (*Vetiveria zizanioides*) were known to more than seventy percent of the women. But the result point towards a scope for dissemination of information regarding the importance of these foods sources as the women were not aware of all the properties of these food sources. A planned strategies should focus on dissemination of knowledge on use of these foods for their sustainability in maternal health care through use of local resources.

INTRODUCTION

The health of a mother and to be born child depends upon the kind of maternal health care both at pre and post delivery stage. It is a matter of concern especially in India with limitation of health care services for a vast population. This care was provided to the women at the household level even when health care facilities were not available. Various food sources were indigenously used with in the household at different stages of health care. Wang (1988) conceptualized indigenous knowledge as the sum-total knowledge and practices which are based on people accumulated experiences in dealing with situations and problems. This information is then passed on from generation to generation by word of mouth. The traditional knowledge about the use of naturally available foods is communicated within the society and is passed from generation to generation. This is stored in the memories and activities of the people.

Punia and Chhikara (1999) found that in the rural areas, different types of home remedies were prevalent for the treatment of ailments and diseases. The reason behind the adoption of home remedies was reported to be the

continuation of joint family system in which knowledge was passed on. The elder lady or mother in law advises on home remedies as they themselves used the same in past when doctors were not so readily available. In the similar context, it is a pool of knowledge related to use of available resources developed by a given community for a particular region. Acquisition of this information takes place over along period of time through the accumulation of experiences, informal experimentation and intimate understanding of the environment. This calls for preservation of this rich heritage.

In this context an attempt was made under the Extension Component of AICRP on Home Science to collect and document the indigenous knowledge regarding maternal health care in form of a technical bulletin (Roy, 2001). The main objective of the present study is to determine the awareness of the rural women regarding the properties of some selected foods in terms of their effectiveness for pre and post delivery care.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Locale of the Study: The study was conducted in three districts of Punjab namely Bhatinda, Faridkot and Ferozpur. Each district was represented by two blocks and each block by two villages. From the list of all households, twenty five households per village were randomly selected who had in each village at least one

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female member between the age group of 25-45 years and have given birth to at least one child.. Thus three hundred respondents were selected.

The data was collected through personal interview using a structured interview schedule. The schedule was tested for its reliability (0.78) and validity (0.88) and was pre-tested on a sample of 30 rural women of non-sampled areas of the selected districts.

Steps in Determining the Awareness Regarding the Purpose of Use of Foods: Five most frequently and extensively used foods and their properties documented from the state of Punjab were selected for the purpose. All the 300 respondents were personally interviewed for determining their awareness regarding the selected foods being used for maternal health care. The interview pertained only to the awareness of use of these foods for maternal health care (pre and post delivery)

The respondents who responded positively (those aware that the selected foods are used during maternal health care) were further interviewed to determine their awareness regarding specific properties which these foods possessed due to which they were used for maternal health care. These properties have been listed in the technical bulletin and have been compiled with the help of ayurvedic doctors and literature. The response of the respondents was recorded in terms of 'Yes' or 'No'.

The number and percentage were worked out of the total (300 respondents) and the also out of the number of respondents who positively responded of being aware of the use of the selected foods for maternal health care.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Personal and Socio-Economic Characteristics of the Rural Women: The first part of the findings is related to the personal characteristics of the respondents. The data in Table 1 indicates that majority of the respondents i.e. 65.33 per cent were found in the middle age group and 34.67 per cent of the respondents belong to young age group.

With regard to the educational level of the respondents the findings indicates that equal percentage (41.67%) of the respondents had low and medium level of education. High caste was in majority (71.33%) with only 7.67 per cent respondents from schedule caste and 21.00 per cent from backward caste

Table 1: Distribution of the respondents according to their personal, socio-economic characteristics (n = 300)

Personal socio-economic characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Age		
Young (25-35 yrs)	104	34.67
Middle (35-45 yrs)	196	65.33
Educational Level		
Low (Primary and below)	125	41.67
Medium (Primary to Matric)	125	41.67
High (Matric to graduation)	50	16.67
Caste		
Schedule Caste	214	71.23
Backward Caste	63	21
High Caste	23	7.67

Awareness Regarding Properties of Foods: The findings regarding the distribution of rural women regarding their awareness of the properties due to which the selected foods were effectively used for maternal health care are given below:

Awareness Regarding Asafoetida (*Ferula asafetida*): Asafotedia commonly known as 'Hing' was known to 89.67 per cent of the total respondents for its use during pre and post delivery care. It was known to induce menstruation, improve bowel movement (laxative), promote digestion and control gas formation in the stomach to all the respondents who were aware that Asafoetida was used for pre post delivery care. But only 98.15% of them knew that it controls weight. A large majority were also aware of its fat reducing property. The least known was its effectiveness in bringing urinary disorders improvement. The results hence, indicate that all the respondents were not aware of all the properties of Asafoetida which was a commonly available and very effective source for maternal health care.

Table 2: Distribution of respondents according to the awareness regarding the properties of Asafoetida (*Ferula asafetida*) for maternal health care

Purpose of use	Respondents		
	Frequency	Percentage	
		(n=300)	(n=269)
Reduces body fat	251	83.67	93.3
Control weight	264	88	98.15
Induce menstruation	269	89.67	100
Cures urinary disorders	204	68	75.83
Laxative	269	89.67	100
Promote digestion	269	89.67	100
Control gas formation in stomach	269	89.67	100

The study by Camey et al, (1997) also found that some advantages of the traditional knowledge and practices were observed but there were inadequacies of information for which the practice were used. The in-depth analysis of this information along with involvement of the members of the social system can enhance this knowledge further and lead to its useful dissemination within the system for future sustainability.

Awareness Regarding the Purpose of Use of Blankultthi (*Cassia absus*): Out of the total respondents 90.67 percent were aware that Blankultthi commonly known as 'Chasku', was used for maternal health care (Table 3). All the respondents were aware that it prevents infection, controls allergic conditions of the skin. Its ability to normalize reproductive system was known to 98.15 per cent respondents. Similarly 90.33 per cent were aware that Blankultthi arrests hemorrhage. The effectiveness of this food in purifying blood was known to only 82.15 per cent of the women. Burman (2002) also found farmers using more of local remedies, which are several times cheaper than modern drugs with low investment cost for increased livestock productivity as they were aware of their effectiveness. The information and knowledge dissemination regarding the effectiveness of lesser known properties can enhance the use Blankultthi for maternal health care among the rural women.

Table 3: Distribution of respondents according to the awareness regarding the properties of Blankultthi (*Cassia absus*) for maternal health care

Purpose of use	Respondents		
	Frequency	Percentage	
		(n=300)	(n=269)
Normalize reproductive system	264	88	92.67
Arrests hemorrhage	243	81	90.33
Prevent infection	269	89.67	100
Control allergic conditions of the skin	269	90.67	100
Control diarrhea	178	59.33	66.17
Prevent obesity	183	61	68.02
Purify the blood	221	73.67	82.15

Awareness Regarding the Purpose of Use of Chunga (*Symplocus cochinchinensis*) : More than ninety percent of the total of 300 respondents as evident from the data in Table 4, were aware of use of Chunga commonly known as 'Lodh' for maternal health care. Out of these 284 respon-

Table 4: Distribution of respondents according to the awareness regarding

Purpose of use	Respondents		
	Frequency	Percentage	
		(n=300)	(n=269)
Control excessive bleeding	278	92.67	97.88
Control general weakness	284	94.67	100
Control diarrhea	167	55.67	58.8
Control cough	271	90.33	95.42
Control cold	267	89	94.01
Provide strength	149	49.67	52.46
Keep the skeleton strong	126	42	44.36

dents that is more than ninety percent knew that it controls general debility (100.00 %), excessive bleeding (97.88%) and cough (95.42%). Its use in controlling diarrhoea, providing strength and keeping skeleton strong was known to nearly fifty percent of these respondents. The effectiveness of the food source especially in keeping the skeleton strong can prove very beneficial both for the mother and the foetus. Therefore, the women should be made aware of this property.

Awareness regarding the purpose of use of Cumin seeds (*Cuminum cyminum*) : Commonly used in the kitchen and called 'Zeera' in local language, it was known to 287 out of 300 respondents for its use for maternal health care. The data in Table 5 shows that more than seventy per cent of these women were aware of its properties like controlling diarrhoea (98.95%), increasing milk secretion (86.75%), and promoting urination (93.97%) besides reducing weight after delivery (71.42%). Its effectiveness as a cooling agent for the body was also known to nearly 60.00 per cent of the 287 women. Twenty one species of plant material was also found to be locally used

Table 5: Distribution of respondents according to the awareness regarding

Purpose of use	Respondents		
	Frequency	Percentage	
		(n=300)	(n=269)
Increase milk secretion	249	83	86.75
Reduces weight after delivery	205	68.33	71.42
Promote digestion	243	81	84.66
Control diarrhea	284	94.67	98.95
Promote urination	241	80.33	83.97
Provide cooling effect to body	172	57.33	59.93

in Assam during menstruation, pregnancy and child birth (Borthakur 1992). The use of this commonly available and used food source can be further enhanced through information dissemination regarding its lesser known properties.

Awareness regarding the purpose of use of Poppy Seeds (*Vetiveria zizanioides*) : As shown in Table 6 a very large percentage of the respondents (93.67 %) were aware of the use of poppy seeds known as 'Khas Khas' in Punjab for maternal health. More than 80.00 per cent were aware of six of the ten properties listed for which poppy was used. A common food known for its usefulness was known for its effectiveness in increasing milk secretion (99.2 per cent), controlling diarrhea (89.75 per cent) and controlling the generation of gas in the stomach (89.30 per cent) to majority of these respondents. The least known property was its ability to induce sleep about which only 32.15 per cent of these respondents were aware. Poppy being commonly available in households, its use needs to be promoted for its properties which are lesser known among the rural women. Rangnekar (1994) also reported that women in Gujarat and Southern Rajasthan were aware of local feed sources which increased the production of milk. These sources when validated by the scientist were found effective.

Table 6: Distribution of respondents according to the awareness regarding

Purpose of use	Respondents		
	Frequency	Percentage	
		(n=300)	(n=269)
Control nausea	156	52	55.12
Control vomiting	171	57	60.42
Control gas formation in stomach	253	84.33	89.39
Improve digestion	161	87	56.89
Reduce body fat	243	81	85.86
Control weight	249	83	87.98
Control diarrhea	254	84.67	89.75
Increase secretion of milk	281	93.67	99.29
Control cold	210	70	74.2
Control cough	197	65.67	69.61
Induce sleep	91	30.33	32.15

The present study hence revealed that majority of the rural women were aware of the selected foods for maternal health care but all of them were not aware of the range of properties possessed by these food sources and their effectiveness in maternal health care. This can be attributed to lack of knowledge about the properties of the foods or their usefulness which is the resultant effect of non transfer of information within the family or social system and excessive dependence on chemical based medication. Dissemination of the indigenous knowledge is necessary because it is socially desirable, economically affordable, and sustainable and involves minimum risk and procedures. The dissemination of scientific information regarding the properties of these foods will help to motivate younger generation to use them for maternal health care with effective results. The study by Burman (2002) also indicate the increase in usage of local remedies when users were aware of the properties for which they were found effective.

The sustainability of foods among the rural women can help them to become self reliant by using local knowledge and resources for maternal health care.

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