

## A NARRATIVE REVIEW

# Exploring the determinants of exclusive breastfeeding practices among first-time mothers: A narrative review

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## Abstract

Exclusive breastfeeding (EBF) means giving only breast milk to babies 0-6 month without giving any drinks or food, except medicines and vitamins. Only 44% of babies received EBF worldwide in 2020. Meanwhile, in 2025, the target for achieving EBF is 50%. The research aim is to analyze the determinant of the success of EBF for the first-time mother. Database search via Google Scholar, Pubmed, Web of Science, Science Direct, Scopus, and Pro Quest for articles published since 2020-2022. Search keywords influencing factors, determinants, exclusive breastfeeding, first-time mothers. We found 19 articles but only 6 articles were suitable with the inclusion criteria. From the research findings that the importance factors influence EBF practice are self-efficacy, social support, culture, relationships between parents, happiness in breastfeeding, and social environment. It is recommended that tracing activities be part of increasing the success of EBF practices for first-time mothers. (*Afr J Reprod Health* 2024; 28 [10s]: 239-248).

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**Keywords:** Determinants; exclusive breastfeeding; influencing factors; first-time mothers

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## Résumé

L'allaitement exclusif (EBF) signifie donner uniquement du lait maternel aux bébés de 0 à 6 mois sans leur donner de boissons ou de nourriture, sauf des médicaments et des vitamines. En 2020, seulement 44% des bébés ont reçu l'EBF dans le monde. Parallèlement, en 2025, l'objectif est d'atteindre 50% d'EBF. L'objectif de la recherche est d'analyser les déterminants du succès de l'EBF pour les mères primipares. Une recherche dans les bases de données via Google Scholar, Pubmed, Web of Science, Science Direct, Scopus et Pro Quest pour des articles publiés de 2020 à 2022 a été effectuée. Les mots-clés de recherche comprenaient facteurs d'influence, déterminants, allaitement exclusif, premières mères. Nous avons trouvé 19 articles, mais seulement 6 articles répondaient aux critères d'inclusion. Les résultats des recherches montrent que les facteurs importants influençant la pratique de l'EBF sont l'auto-efficacité, le soutien social, la culture, les relations entre parents, le bonheur dans l'allaitement et l'environnement social. Il est recommandé que les activités de suivi fassent partie de l'augmentation du succès des pratiques d'EBF pour les mères primipares. (*Afr J Reprod Health* 2024; 28 [10s]: 239-248).

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**Mots-clés:** Déterminants; allaitement exclusif; facteurs d'influence; premières mères

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## Introduction

Exclusive breastfeeding is the act of giving only breast milk to babies from birth to six months of age without giving fluids or other food, including water, unless there is a need for medicines or vitamins. It is the best nutritional choice for babies aged 0-6 months and is recommended up to two years of age. The importance of EBF for maintaining a baby's health is that babies who receive exclusive breast milk for up to 6 months have a 93% reduced risk of death compared to those who do not receive

exclusive breast milk<sup>1</sup>. Providing exclusive breast milk effectively reduces the number of infectious and non-infectious diseases in babies, resulting in a reduction in the incidence of illness and infant death<sup>2</sup>. Globally, sub-optimal breastfeeding is responsible for 45% of deaths from neonatal infections, 30% of deaths from diarrhea, and 18% of deaths from acute respiratory infections in children aged less than five years<sup>3</sup>.

Based on data from the World Health Organisation (WHO) in 2020, only around 44% of babies aged 0-6 months in the world received

exclusive breast milk during the 2015-2020 period<sup>4</sup>. According to UNICEF in 2020, the level of EBF varied in various world regions, namely between 22% and 52% in Asia, 33% in the Middle East, 32% in Eastern Europe, and 26% in North America. One of the global targets set by the WHO is to increase the EBF level by at least 50% by 2025, and by 70% by 2030<sup>5</sup>. Breastfeeding contributes to most of the goals and achievements of a more prosperous and sustainable future for humans<sup>6</sup>.

There is a lot of discussion about EBF, but knowledge about providing it to first-time mothers is limited. There are many challenges and barriers to breastfeeding that can influence a mother's decision to exclusively breastfeed, especially for first-time mothers.

Early references revealed mixed relationships between maternal self-efficacy and breastfeeding success factors. The best psychological support can revive a virtuous cycle involving the prophylactic role of breastfeeding in reducing maternal psychological distress<sup>7</sup>. Previous research in Kenya showed that first-time mothers were less likely to practice exclusive breastfeeding. Success in breastfeeding during the first pregnancy is a determining factor in the success of breastfeeding practices in the future<sup>8,9</sup>. The objective of this study is to analyse the experiences of first-time mothers and the determinants of successful EBF in first-time mothers.

## Methods

This literature review used article searches in the research number database, using the internet and reviewing articles. The search was conducted from August 2023 to January 2024 on articles that focussed on the assessment of first-time mothers breastfeeding EBF experiences. The approach was to explore quantitative and qualitative parameters in the published papers. The review focussed on the determinants of EBF success, especially in first-time mothers in terms of first-time breastfeeding experience. Databases were searched through Google scholar, Pubmed, Web of Science, Science Direct, Scopus and Pro Quest for papers published since 2020-2022. Search keywords influencing

factors, determinants, exclusive breastfeeding, first-time mothers.

The search yielded 19 articles, of which 6 were deemed relevant for inclusion in the review. Subsequently, the titles, abstracts, appropriateness of the topics, purpose, methods, sample, data source and results of each article were first analysed and identified for eligibility. Peer-reviewed journal articles and reports were retrieved, reviewed and analysed. A bibliography of identified sources was used to identify relevant references for the review. All articles included in this review had to fulfil the following inclusion criteria: original research and primary data, scope suitability, research addressing EBF especially in first-time breastfeeding mothers, new mothers experiences of being a first-time breastfeeding mother, published and translated into English. In addition, it must be available in full text and within the period described. The lead author listed and cited all references used in this review.

## Results

The six selected articles have appropriate topics related to exclusive breastfeeding, influencing factors, determinants, and first-time mothers. Studies were published in 2020, 2021 and 2022, and the papers were published from six countries: Australia, Western Ethiopia, Turkey, Canada, Sweden, and Papua New Guinea, and Indonesia. The analysis identified factors that influencing the EBF administration practices of first-time mothers. The results showed three articles that explain the factors that influence the practice of giving EBF in first-time mothers, namely self-efficacy, support, and continuity in breastfeeding, as well as the importance of personal views experienced by a mother in the decision to give EBF.

In two articles, social, psychological, knowledge, and interpersonal factors are among the complex factors that influence breastfeeding experiences and exclusive practices. Another article explored and described the factors that influence the length of breastfeeding time for first-time mothers. The article highlighted the importance of understanding and responding to the needs and barriers in order to provide appropriate support for

mothers in optimal breastfeeding, according to the cultural context and environment in which they live.

The design of the six articles was as follows: one prospective longitudinal cohort research article, three qualitative study articles, one constructivist view article, and one descriptive cross-sectional study article. Data collection for six articles used a mixed quantitative and qualitative approach by conducting in-depth interviews. Quantitative research was obtained from 2 articles with a sample size of 922 respondents consist of 422 first-time mothers with infants aged 0-6 months residing in Bahir Dar City and 500 first-time mothers participating in a longitudinal study. While the other 4 articles used in-depth interview methods with a total of 75 mothers who had given birth and were breastfeeding for the first time, namely in the first article, 20 Australians who had given birth for the first time, in the second article, 20 mothers who had given birth for the first time, to describe their experiences. breastfeeding, in the fourth article 15 older first-time mothers (age 35+), and the sixth article 30 first-time mothers in rural areas.

The results of the six articles were as follows: The first article focussed on the experiences of first-time mothers in Australia in facing the challenges and positive experiences of starting breastfeeding after discharge from the hospital. The explanatory and success factors were self-efficacy, social support, and sustainability. Self-efficacy plays a role in how some mothers overcome breastfeeding challenges in the early and breastfeeding years. Providing support is a key component of successful breastfeeding after returning home from the hospital. Sources of support included social networks, partners, family, close friends, semi-professional support, and professional support (midwives, nurses, and lactation consultants<sup>10</sup>.

The second article focussed on the prevalence and insights into factors of EBF practices in a community of first-time mothers in Bahir Dar, Ethiopia. The results showed that the related factors such as maternal knowledge, social support, education, and other factors, including marital status and the number of Antenatal Care (ANC) visits, can influence the mother's decision to provide exclusive breastfeeding<sup>11</sup>. The third article focussed on the use

of metaphors by first-time mothers in describing breastfeeding experiences. Analyzing these metaphors revealed factors such as first-time mothers' perceptions, experiences, and understanding of breastfeeding, and exemplified how first-time mothers use metaphors to convey breastfeeding-related experiences. The metaphors used by mothers can provide insights into feelings, challenges, joys, or other emotional experiences related to breastfeeding<sup>12</sup>.

We also investigated the psychological and emotional dimensions involved in the breastfeeding experience. The most important factor in maintaining health while breastfeeding is the mother's confidence in what she feels and achieves while breastfeeding. Women express their experiences, feelings, or subconscious thoughts about breastfeeding through metaphors. Nurses and midwives have an important role in providing services to mothers during breastfeeding. If breastfeeding support providers can define breastfeeding metaphors, this will be helpful in predicting difficulties that may be experienced during the process.

The fourth article focussed on the experiences of breastfeeding and becoming a first-time mother at an older age. We analysed the challenges, feelings, and emotional experiences unique to women entering motherhood at a more mature age. This article provided an understanding of the psychological, emotional, and social aspects of the process of breastfeeding and motherhood. The results of this study may provide better guidance for health practitioners and social support for similar groups of mothers<sup>13</sup>.

The fifth article focussed primarily on the relationships between first-time mothers' satisfaction and the duration of breastfeeding. The analysis involved an exploration of the correlation between breastfeeding satisfaction and psychological factors such as positive relationships between parents and children. Emphasis was placed on the importance of maternal satisfaction in breastfeeding practices and the length of breastfeeding. The results showed that having an understanding of, and the ability to handle stress and finding meaning in life experiences can contribute to

**Table 1:** List of selected articles in the study

No	Researcher, year, and title	Research objectives	Methods	Sample	Result
1	James L, Sweet L, Donnellan-fernandez R. (2020)., Self-efficacy, support and sustainability: A qualitative study of the experience of establishing breastfeeding for first-time Australian mothers following early discharge	To explore the experiences of first-time mothers in establishing breastfeeding after early discharge from the hospital, focusing on self-efficacy, support, and sustainability	Qualitative study using in-depth interviews	20 first-time Australian mothers with criteria First-time mothers who had early discharge from the hospital after childbirth	Mothers reported varying levels of confidence and support, highlighting the importance of post-discharge follow-up and community support to sustain breastfeeding
2	Ayalew T. (2020)., Exclusive Breastfeeding Practice and Associated Factors Among First-Time Mothers in Bahir Dar City, North West Ethiopia: A Community-Based Cross-Sectional Study	To assess the prevalence and factors associated with exclusive breastfeeding among first-time mothers in Bahir Dar City	Community based cross-sectional study	422 first-time mothers with criteria Mothers with infants aged 0-6 months residing in Bahir Dar City	60.8% of first-time mothers practiced exclusive breastfeeding. Key factors included maternal knowledge, postnatal care visits, and husband support
3	Uçtu AK, Uludağ E. (2022), Breastfeeding Metaphors: A Qualitative Study of First-Time Mothers	To explore the metaphors used by first-time mothers to describe their breastfeeding experiences	Qualitative study using in-depth interviews	20 first-time mothers with criteria First-time mothers who were breastfeeding	Metaphors such as "life-giving, nurturing and bonding were commonly used, reflecting the emotional and complex nature of breastfeeding experiences
4	Edwards R, Cragg B, Dunn S, Peterson WE. (2021)., The Breastfeeding and Early Motherhood Experiences of Older First-Time Mothers: A Constructivist Grounded Theory Study	To understand the breastfeeding and early motherhood experiences of older first-time mothers	Constructivist grounded theory study	15 older first-time mothers (aged 35+)	Themes included balancing breastfeeding with career responsibilities, the importance of social support, and the impact of previous life experiences on breastfeeding practices
5	Granberg A, Ekström A, Carolina B. (2020)., First-Time Mothers' Enjoyment of Breastfeeding Correlates with Duration of Breastfeeding, Sense of Coherence, and Parental Couple and Child Relation:	To examine the correlations between first-time mothers' enjoyment of breastfeeding, breastfeeding duration, sense of coherence, and parental relationships	Longitudinal cohort study	500 first-time mothers with criteria First-time mothers participating in a longitudinal study	Positive correlations were found between breastfeeding enjoyment and breastfeeding duration, sense of coherence, and quality of parental relationships

6	A Longitudinal Swedish Cohort Study Maviso MK, Ferguson B, Kaforau LM, Capper T. (2021)., A Qualitative Descriptive Inquiry Into Factors Influencing Early Weaning and Breastfeeding Duration Among First-Time Mothers in Papua New Guinea's Rural Eastern Highlands	To explore the factors influencing early weaning and breastfeeding duration among first-time mothers in rural Papua New Guinea	Qualitative descriptive inquiry	30 first-time mothers that is first-time mothers in rural areas	Cultural practices, lack of breastfeeding support, and economic pressures were identified as major factors contributing to early weaning and shorter breastfeeding duration
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a mother's success and satisfaction with breastfeeding. The article also showed the importance of family relationships: the dynamics of the relationship between the parent and child pair in the context of successful breastfeeding. The paper showed the complexity of the relationship between psychological factors, interpersonal relationships, and the success of breastfeeding practices for mothers who breastfeed for the first time<sup>14</sup>. The sixth article focussed on factors influencing the decisions of first-time mothers in rural Papua New Guinea to stop breastfeeding early or determine the duration of breastfeeding. It described how social, cultural, and environmental dynamics play roles in breastfeeding practices in the Papua New Guinea<sup>15</sup>. Table 1 presents the list of selected articles in the study.

## Discussion

This study identified several factors associated with the use of EBF in mothers giving birth for the first time. These include emotional, psychological factors, maternal age, maternal knowledge, social support, maternal understanding, education, marital status, number of ANC visits, family support (both parents and husband's support), interpersonal relationships, mother's beliefs, culture, and the environment.

Breastfeeding process is a complex process in which mothers experience several emotions that shape the breastfeeding experience<sup>16</sup>. Psychological impacts on breast milk adequacy, such as pessimism and maternal fear, influence the decision of mothers to provide EBF. Psychological factors are some of

the causes of postpartum stress. Three internal factors, namely motivation, perception, and attitude, have influence on psychological factors and the decision to take action<sup>17</sup>. This anxiety is obvious in new mothers before they start breastfeeding<sup>18</sup>. Early breastfeeding cessation is associated with physiological factors that the mother perceives, such as delayed lactation, insufficient milk production, nipple pain, latch issues, and a lack of social support<sup>19</sup>. The occurrence of psychological problems can interfere with optimal breastfeeding results. In addition, the level of symptoms of depression, anxiety, and sadness during the postpartum period is higher in first-time mothers when compared with multiparas<sup>20</sup>.

Having an understanding of, and providing support to new mothers in these various aspects can influence breastfeeding success and provide support for a positive breastfeeding experience. Being a mother for the first time at an old age has a significant relationship with exclusive breastfeeding. The results of a study by Baumgartner T., et al (2020)<sup>21</sup> show that older women who become mothers for the first time tend to breastfeed exclusively. Older maternal age has a significant relationship with the duration of partial breastfeeding<sup>21</sup>. Older and first-time mothers are more likely to be mothers whose fully formed adult identities and established personal and professional lives strongly influence decisions regarding breastfeeding<sup>22</sup>.

Education is also a determinant factor in a mother's decision to provide EBF<sup>23</sup>. Higher levels of education correlate with better self-efficacy. Highly

educated mothers are 1,203 times more likely to carry out EBF than mothers who have never attended school<sup>24</sup>. Higher education influences a mother's knowledge. Good knowledge about breastfeeding plays an important role in the breastfeeding process<sup>25</sup>. Higher knowledge regarding EBF is 5.9 times more likely to provide EBF compared to mothers who have lower knowledge regarding breastfeeding. Mothers with higher education are 1.5 times more likely to know the recommendations for EBF, so they are 5.6 times more likely to intend to provide exclusive breastfeeding for up to six months<sup>26</sup>.

Likewise, ANC visits were positively associated with EBF as a determinant factor. Exclusive breastfeeding was found to be higher in mothers who had five or more ANC visits and had delivered their babies via normal deliveries<sup>27</sup>. Receiving antenatal care was positively associated with providing EBF. Mothers who attend antenatal care are exposed to information about EBF. The information and education provided by health workers during ANC visits has improved EBF practices. The majority of mothers said they received breastfeeding information from a nurse or doctor during ANC visits<sup>28</sup>.

Including the support of husbands in counseling sessions about breastfeeding during ANC visits may strengthen mother's confidence to continue breastfeeding for 6 months<sup>29</sup>. It is proven that a social environment of close friends and relatives who provide quality support regarding breastfeeding helps women achieve better breastfeeding outcomes. The mother's age and the woman's family environment play important roles in achieving expectations regarding the duration of breastfeeding<sup>30</sup>. The experience of women who received proactive peer support via telephone was successful in increasing the maintenance of breastfeeding up to six months of age<sup>31</sup>.

Having family support and a conducive home environments can strengthen the provision of EBF<sup>32</sup>. It is important to provide first-time mothers with support that is individualized, rather than generalized, to meet the information needs and practical skills of each first-time mother.

A significant increase in the quality of the mother's relationship with her experience of all types of husband's support was associated with a longer period of exclusive breastfeeding<sup>33</sup>.

Available evidence indicates that there is a relationship between family support and the implementation of EBF provisions<sup>34</sup>. Strong support from the family has an important role in enabling mothers to work while still providing EBF. Efforts to encourage EBF provision should focus on involving husbands and other family members in health programs to support breastfeeding<sup>35</sup>. The influence of grandmothers can have a significant impact on breastfeeding practices<sup>36</sup>. Previous research suggests that pregnant and breastfeeding mothers perceive the availability of tangible breastfeeding resources as a significant form of social support for breastfeeding initiation and continuation among women.

Breastfeeding social support is considered most critical in the first 2 weeks after birth who are most likely to initiate and continue breastfeeding during the first 2 weeks postpartum<sup>37</sup>.

There is a very strong and significant relationship between the support that health workers give for the provision of EBF<sup>38</sup>. How much support and information they offer as health professionals determines their role<sup>39</sup>. The type of support provided by health workers can affect the success of breastfeeding such as health education by incorporating information and guidance on breastfeeding from prenatal, antenatal to postnatal periods. Exclusive breastfeeding information and education can be provided through counseling and mentoring<sup>40</sup>. Support through the provision of information is very important in the initiation and maintenance of EBF<sup>41</sup>. It helps increase feelings of self-efficacy in providing EBF<sup>42</sup>.

Mothers who have strong self-efficacy are 5.67 times more likely to provide exclusive breastfeeding than mothers who do not have self-efficacy<sup>43</sup>. Self-efficacy has a big role in the regulatory process through individual motivation and work performance. People with strong self-efficacy can put forth their best efforts to overcome obstacles<sup>44</sup>. Breastfeeding self-efficacy is a mother's confidence

in facing various situations, determining appropriate actions, facing obstacles, and achieving the goal of giving EBF to her baby<sup>45</sup>.

The first experience of breastfeeding for a mother is a moment full of challenges in terms of self-confidence and starting the breastfeeding process. First-time mothers in Turkey often feel very worried about a possible lack of breast milk supply<sup>46</sup>. The perception of a lack of breast milk is the main reason for stopping breastfeeding. Lack of confidence in breastfeeding and misinterpretation of the baby's behaviour such as crying, is interpreted as a sign of hunger, and frequent crying is responded to by the mother because the availability of breast milk is insufficient<sup>47,48</sup>. Consistent data from high-income countries, such as Australia, shows that optimal implementation of breastfeeding is closely related to the intention to breastfeed, confidence in one's own abilities, and social and professional support<sup>49</sup>. Cultural aspects, such as traditional beliefs and practices, can influence the decision to provide or not provide breast milk and introduce solid foods early<sup>50</sup>. Beliefs about breast milk<sup>51</sup>. Health care providers indicated that EBF practices in the community were unsatisfactory and identified socio-cultural factors as barriers to exclusive breastfeeding practices<sup>52</sup>. Myths and false beliefs that the supply of breast milk is insufficient and that EBF is deficient in nutrients and requires additional food continue to influence infant feeding practices<sup>53</sup>.

Providing herbal concoctions, breast milk purification ceremonies, and relational influences mainly come from mothers-in-law, midwives, grandmothers, shamans, and other elderly people in the community<sup>54</sup>. Maternal misunderstandings with the perception that grandmother did not do EBF yet their child was growing well, and the baby's gestures showed the baby's readiness to start eating<sup>55</sup>. The results of previous research on giving sugar water to babies in Kepung Village show that the belief passed down from generation to generation can make babies calmer because they are full, which has a positive impact on breastfeeding<sup>56</sup>. Another obstacle to giving amulet water as an effort to instill faith in Islam and protect babies from evil spirits is believed to be deep-rooted<sup>57</sup>. The perception that breast milk is contaminated, colostrum is considered dirty, the

fear that breastfeeding mothers will die from breastfeeding for too long, and the perception that breast milk alone is not enough for breastfeeding mothers are additional factors that influence the practice of giving EBF<sup>58</sup>.

Research studies have found that research related to exclusive breastfeeding by combining quantitative and qualitative studies can provide a comprehensive understanding of the determinants of EBF practices among first-time mothers. Among first-time mothers, by adopting a mixed-methods approach, future research can build on the comprehensive understanding of the determinants of EBF provided by existing studies, which ultimately provides the necessary understanding as preparation for mothers and leads to better breastfeeding practices and outcomes for first-time mothers.

## Conclusion

The studies included in this review showed that emotional, psychological, maternal age, maternal knowledge, social support, maternal understanding, education, marital status, number of ANC visits, family support, interpersonal relationships, maternal beliefs, culture and environment appear to favour successful breastfeeding. Regarding population groups, the strongest evidence is the influence of exclusive breastfeeding by first-time mothers. Future research is needed to evaluate barriers to breastfeeding duration, so that high quality evidence can be applied in breastfeeding practice.

## Authors contribution

Oktarianita: Conceptualized, designed the research, collected, analyzed the article, wrote the paper and edited

Ratna Dwi Wulandari: Reviewing empirical studies designing the methodology.

Stefanus Supriyanto: Reviewing empirical studies designing the methodology.

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