



ASSESSMENT OF FOOD BELIEFS IN PREGNANT MOTHERS IN A RURAL AREA OF SRI LANKA

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Maternal diet is an important determinant of healthy pregnancy and outcomes of pregnancy. In Sri Lanka, the prevalence of low birth weight, maternal underweight and iron deficiency anaemia were 17%, 13.4 % and 34% respectively. Since the mother's diet is affected by socio-cultural influences such as food beliefs, this study aims to investigate the existing beliefs regarding food during pregnancy.

A cross-sectional survey was conducted at Maternal and Child Health (MCH) clinics in Pannala MOH division, located in Kurunegala district. Pregnant women, who came to the MCH clinics during data collection period, were interviewed after taking verbal consent. A pre-tested interviewer administered questionnaire was used to gather information. Simple descriptive analysis was used.

One hundred seventy-six pregnant women were interviewed and out of them 114 (65%) believed in restricting some food item during pregnancy. The age of pregnant mothers ranged from 19 to 40 years with a mean age of 27.3 ± 4.59 years. The entire sample was literate and 55% completed secondary education. Results revealed that sixty-eight percent (78) of the sample believed eating plenty of green-leafy vegetables during pregnancy is important as it helps with proper growth of child's hair. Seventy percent of participants restricted unripe pineapple and papaya in early pregnancy with a fear of abortion. Sixty-five percent (74) of respondents believed sardin, crab, prawns, cuttlefish, tomato, and bread fruit are "hot-natured" food that can cause miscarriage in pregnancy. Fifty-nine percent (68) of pregnant women believed that food viewed as "cold" such as spinach, mung-bean, ash pumpkin, should be avoided during pregnancy as they can cause diarrhoea in mother, body swelling, stomach discomfort, aches and pains and cough. Eighteen (15.8%) pregnant mothers avoided pork as they believed it could have ill effects and 42% restricted "fresh cow milk" with a fear of having phlegm for them.

This study concluded that a large proportion of the study population had unscientific food beliefs in pregnancy. There is a need for nutrition education and awareness regarding traditional unscientific food beliefs at school and clinics levels.

Keywords: *Food beliefs, maternal diet, pregnant mothers, pregnancy*