

**PROMOTION OF BREASTFEEDING AS A PROTECTIVE FACTOR FOR THE  
ORAL HEALTH OF THE NEWBORN**

**PROMOCIÓN DE LACTANCIA MATERNA COMO FACTOR PROTECTOR DE  
LA SALUD BUCAL DEL RECIÉN NACIDO**

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**ABSTRACT**

This study is a proposal of health promotion activities aimed at educating pregnant women on the importance of breastfeeding newborn oral health. It is evident the insufficient activities and poor utilization of communicative and community spaces for developing oral health promotion actions in babies. Theoretical methods analysis-synthesis, induction-deduction, empirical methods such as surveys, interviews with pregnant women and dental professionals were used to assess knowledge levels on the subject. The proposed activities make it possible to disseminate oral health promotion actions in the stomatological area, based on the methodological didactic needs through a multidisciplinary approach. The proposal fosters acquiring new working methods enhancing oral health promotion and preventive care for newborns.

**KEYWORDS:** breastfeeding newborn oral health; educational activities; preventive health promotion activities

## **RESUMEN**

Se propuso la elaboración de actividades de promoción de salud dirigidas a educar a las embarazadas sobre la importancia de la lactancia materna en la salud bucodental del recién nacido; debido a que existen insuficientes actividades y el poco aprovechamiento de los espacios comunicativos y comunitarios para desarrollar acciones de promoción de salud en el desarrollo bucodental del recién nacido. Se utilizaron métodos teóricos como análisis-síntesis, inducción-deducción, métodos empíricos como encuestas, entrevistas a embarazadas y profesionales de la estomatología para conocer el nivel de conocimiento sobre el tema. Las actividades propuestas posibilitan aprovechar y divulgar las acciones de promoción de salud en el área estomatológica, a partir de las necesidades didáctico metodológicas sobre estos temas desde un enfoque multidisciplinar, adquiriendo nuevos métodos de trabajo para potenciar el trabajo de promoción y prevención en la salud bucal.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** salud bucodental; actividades educativas; promoción de salud

## **INTRODUCTION**

Breastfeeding confers multiple benefits for both mother and child. Moreover, it involves a crucial stimulus for the development and growth of all structures of the newborn's oral apparatus and respiratory system. Nutritional aspects, growth and development, immunological protection, digestive system protection, facial development, psychological benefits and the prevention of jaundice are in the child. It reduces postpartum bleeding, helps prevent breast and ovarian cancer, positively influences female aesthetics and provides psychological benefits in mother. At the societal level, it reduces infant morbidity and mortality, strengthens families, contributes to economic savings, and obtains ecological benefits.

Given its significance, this topic should be integrated into health education activities during pregnancy to ensure expectant mothers understand the importance of exclusive breastfeeding during the baby's first months of life (Rodríguez et al., 2017). Consequently, healthcare professionals must be prepared to educate mothers during the breastfeeding period. In this regard, authors such as Rodríguez & Martínez (2011) highlight the influence of breastfeeding in preventing transverse micrognathism and deforming oral habits. Meanwhile, Rondón, Zambrano & Guerra (2012) analyze the relationship between breastfeeding and dento-buco-maxillo-facial development.

The specialist in Comprehensive General Stomatology (CGS) is trained to provide comprehensive stomatological care at the primary healthcare level through systematic promotion, prevention, treatment and rehabilitation actions, in collaboration with the rest of the healthcare team. Their role is fundamental at this level, as they work directly with the family physician, other stomatological specialties, and community sectors to improve the health status of a defined population.

However, the practice of stomatology specialists still reveals a need for greater management of health promotion and prevention activities, as well as stronger links with multidisciplinary teams within community settings, particularly regarding the significance of breastfeeding for newborn oral health. A factual diagnosis of the educational process for stomatology residents at the Moa Medical Sciences Branch identified the following shortcomings:

- ✓ Limited involvement of stomatology residents in multidisciplinary promotion and prevention work aimed at educating pregnant women about breastfeeding and its impact on newborn oral health.
- ✓ Insufficient educational activities focused on health promotion related to breastfeeding and neonatal oral health.

- ✓ Underutilization of community spaces for developing health promotion activities addressing breastfeeding as a means to achieve adequate dento-buco-maxillo-facial development in the newborn.

Therefore, the research problem is formulated as follows: How to contribute to health promotion among pregnant women regarding the importance of breastfeeding for the newborn's oral development?

Hence, there is a need to deepen the health promotion process carried out by stomatology professionals, with the support of the multidisciplinary team caring for pregnant women, to enhance their knowledge about the importance of breastfeeding for neonatal oral development. Consequently, the objective is proposed: to develop activities aimed at health promotion in pregnant women to contribute to knowledge about the importance of breast milk for the newborn's oral health.

## **DEVELOPMENT**

Medical education has the mission of training technicians, university professionals and specialists, as well as qualifying the service workers required by the health system, in accordance with the existing needs within the health profile of the Cuban population. The aim is for these professionals to be adequately trained and possess a broad profile to successfully face and resolve health problems. Public health in dentistry can be defined as the science and practice of preventing oral diseases, as well as promoting and improving quality of life through organized society efforts (De la Fuente et al., 2014).

Comprehensive General Stomatology specialty (CGS) emerged from the development of the National Health System and the implementation of a Primary Care Model with a different approach to solving problems of the community, family and individual, employing a biosocial perspective where health promotion and disease prevention criteria prevail.

The first-degree specialist in CGS is the primary person responsible for the oral health of individuals, families and the community, with a social focus, characterized by responsibility, simplicity, modesty, integrity and humaneness. Like all healthcare professionals, they must be scientifically and technically prepared to address oral health issues, with a responsible attitude toward their continuous professional development.

The professional training process conducted in Higher Medical Education centers must guarantee graduates capable of performing the functions inherent to their profession: comprehensive stomatological care, administration, teaching and research. For the successful performance of these functions, graduates must undertake different tasks that implicitly or explicitly include educational work corresponding to this professional within their field of action (Guerra, Coste & Carmona, 2016; Betancourt et al., 2021).

The aforementioned underscores the relevance of universities in maintaining connections with society, its problems and needs. This requires the multidisciplinary work of health professionals in searching solutions to the problems presented within the community.

All of this is considered in health promotion and prevention activities, which, through the work of the stomatology professional, contribute to strengthening the values of individual responsibility for their own oral health.

Promotion and prevention strategies for oral health during gestation are essential in maternal and child health, specifically in the prenatal period, as a healthy pregnancy and safe delivery are fundamental principles for a child to have a healthy and happy life (Saravia, Rodriguez, & YC, 2024). This research primarily refers to the educational activity of health promotion in the care of pregnant women, to provide them with knowledge about the importance of breastfeeding for the newborn's oral health.

The benefits of breastfeeding for mother and child are indisputable, encompassing immunological, nutritional, emotional and psychological aspects. However, the effects of breastfeeding on the development of the oral apparatus and its relationship with potential dentofacial alterations are less widely known.

Exclusive breastfeeding, especially during the first six months of life, is of vital importance today, recognized as the perfect food for the child (Sosa et al., 2017). This process represents a biocultural phenomenon: a combination between a natural act and learned behavior (Cadima et al., 2014). In the neonate, the absence of breastfeeding results in the failure of the first physiological advancement of occlusion (Fuguet et al., 2014). The frustrated sucking instinct promotes the establishment of harmful habits and the development of anomalies (Sosa et al., 2017; Fuguet et al., 2014).

Health promotion was conceptually defined in 1986 at the First International Conference on Promotion as actions capable of providing populations with the necessary means to improve their health and exercise greater control over it, to achieve an adequate state of physical, mental and social well-being. An individual or group must be able to identify aspirations to satisfy their needs and to change or adapt to the environment (Kriger, 1999).

Over the years, the WHO and the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) have outlined numerous strategies to preserve the health status of the community through promotion. In Cuba, before the triumph of the Revolution, health promotion was nonexistent; in the 1960s, it was necessary to create a Unified Health System that eliminated social inequalities and guaranteed a novel care model to develop Comprehensive General Stomatology as a method and link between the stomatologist and the family doctor, with a promotional focus based on community work. The work of the stomatologist in these times is to achieve health for all through community training (Rodríguez & Baly 1997; Díaz, Zaragoza & Travieso 1998).

Other authors state that health education is defined as the discipline responsible for guiding and organizing educational processes with the purpose of positively influencing knowledge, practices and customs of individuals and communities regarding their health (Díaz-Brito et al., 2012). For Aristimuño (2000), educating for health means participating in a project whose policies view health as going beyond the absence of disease. A project that involves internal reflections in individuals about the what, why and purpose of the actions it promotes, which in this case will be in the «social space of health», understood as life itself.

Health education and health promotion are closely intertwined, with health education being a tool and vehicle that, when developed in union with the active participation of people, transforms into health promotion (Quintero et al., 2017).

Many researchs have been conducted on health promotion. Authors such as Calpa et al. (2019) refer to the influence of the population's way and style of life, based on basic information about the community and family's standard of living, in which they propose developing educational strategies as support for promotion and education work for oral health from early ages, accompanied by practical activities aimed at acquiring oral hygiene skills and habits. This allows children, adolescents and adults to learn self-care actions; however, it only refers to healthy lifestyles to be followed generally in general populations.

Meanwhile, García et al. (2023) conduct a study on health promotion in Plan E of the Stomatology program in professional training, stating that conditions exist within the Stomatology curriculum and the syllabi of subjects contributing to the different disciplines of the program. These conditions favor, through the link between theory and practice via work-based education, performance in the area of health promotion, which is of great importance in the present research, from the theoretical systematization around the training and performance of these professionals to develop promotion actions toward pregnant women's care.

Other researches are directed at oral health promotion actions in students and the general population, which is why it is necessary to delve deeper into topics related to the educational activity of Stomatology professionals in promotion focusing on pregnant women to achieve appropriate behaviors for actions consistent with the newborn's oral health.

Based on the analysis of the theoretical references previously presented, the author assumes health promotion as an educational action that allows for systematic intervention in diagnosing the characteristics, needs and interests of pregnant women, in terms of oral health in general and particularly neonatal oral health. This is achieved through the use of methods and tools that lead to increased knowledge aimed at achieving healthy behaviors, where the area of comprehensive stomatological care plays a fundamental role alongside professionals working in Primary Health Care to enhance promotion activities.

Hence, the research refers to health promotion and education for the pregnant population, which should be addressed in forming a culture that provides them with a level of knowledge about the importance of the future newborn's oral development, through correct breastfeeding as the main way to achieving adequate oral health.

The designed activities possess educational, preventive, care-related and teaching actions for the care of pregnant women. Educational function involves characterizing admitted women to diagnose their educational and training needs regarding the importance of breastfeeding for the newborn's oral health. Multidisciplinary work is required in this center for health promotion and education for pregnant women and the family. The term activity is contextualized as being the object of study in several disciplines. In the educational field, activities are considered fundamental tools for achieving meaningful learning, while in other areas they can be understood as organized processes, actions directed at concrete ends or practical manifestations of human behavior. This work addresses some key theoretical references that have contributed to defining and understanding the term «activity».



Vygotsky (1978), one of the main exponents of developmental psychology, considers activity as a fundamental way in which human being interacts with their environment and constructs knowledge. His approach considers activity to be socially mediated, meaning it occurs in a cultural and social context. Through activity, individuals develop higher psychological functions.

Activities should be situated within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which allows the student to learn with the help of others. For Vygotsky, an activity is not just an isolated task but an integral process with a formative and social purpose.

Leontiev (1978) deepens the concept of activity in his psychological theory, proposing that activity is the basic unit of human behavior, composed of three levels: activity, action and operation. Activity has a reason, action has a concrete objective and operation depends on available conditions and skills. This theory highlights that all human activity is oriented toward satisfying a need and develops in specific contexts.

Activities are essential for the development of logical and abstract thinking, allowing to assimilate and accommodate new information through physical or mental action on the environment (Piaget, 1978). This author also states that learning is not a passive transmission of information but a constructive activity; in this sense, activity is directly linked to the development of cognitive structures.

Even when it is focused on verbal instruction, Ausubel, Novak & Hanesian (1976) emphasize the role of activities designed to connect new content with prior knowledge, which should facilitate meaningful assimilation. Activities must have functional value and facilitate deep understanding, hence the emphasis on the use of advance organizers as key introductory activities.

Bruner (1960) proposes that students learn through exploration and active discovery. Therefore, activities should be designed to stimulate curiosity and autonomous thinking, favor inductive learning where the student constructs

general principles from particular cases, and allow active manipulation of the environment and ideas. In this model, activity is the axis of the knowledge construction process.

The analysis of these theoretical references shows that activity is not a simple procedure or task but a complex process laden with intentionality, context and purpose. From Vygotsky to Bruner, it is conceived as the primary means through which learning, development and personal and social transformation are generated.

Therefore, the design, implementation and evaluation of activities must have a solid theoretical foundation that responds to formative objectives and the needs of individuals. Hence, this work presents several activities in alliance with the entire health team—stomatologists, physicians, pediatricians, nutritionists—to enhance actions that raise the level of knowledge among pregnant women about the importance of breastfeeding in the newborn's oral development.

*Promotion activities related to the importance of breastfeeding in the newborn's oral development*

*Activity 1*

Educational Talk: «Breastfeeding: The First Step to a Healthy Mouth»

Objective: To explain to pregnant the importance of breastfeeding in providing essential nutrients and its contribution to the adequate development of the oral cavity and jaw.

Content: Benefits of breastfeeding. Oral anatomy of the newborn. Adequate jaw development through breastfeeding. Reduction of malocclusion risk, the relationship between breastfeeding and the development of adequate dental occlusion, highlighting the importance of natural sucking and tongue positioning. Caries prevention by avoiding prolonged artificial feeding.

Methodology: Participatory talk with audiovisual support.

Materials: Videos, images, anatomical models.

Duration: 45 minutes

Responsible: Dentist, health promoter and CGS.

### Activity 2

Interactive Workshop: «Understanding the impact of breastfeeding on oral health»

Objective: To reinforce knowledge through active participation.

Content: Myths and realities of breastfeeding. Comparison between natural sucking (breast) vs. artificial (bottle). Oral hygiene practices from birth. Identifying habits such as prolonged use of bottles or pacifiers and how these can be mitigated by promoting breastfeeding.

Methodology: Group dynamics, brainstorming, practical case resolution.

Materials: Posters, flashcards, oral models, simulators.

Duration: 60 minutes

Responsible: Stomatology specialists and residents, Pediatrician, General Comprehensive Physician (GCP).

### Activity 3

Short Educational Video: «Breastfeeding and healthy smile»

Objective: To raise awareness and reinforce key messages in a short time.

Content: Brief clips (2-3 minutes) showing: Benefits of breastfeeding. Consequences of prolonged non-nutritive sucking. Tips for preventing early childhood caries. Practical advice for parents. Intervention in the early detection of oral health problems related to feeding, allowing for more effective interventions.

Methodology: Video projection, educational talks at the maternity home with parents, debates on the different topics covered.

Materials: Folders with benefits of breastfeeding and useful tips, use of videos, among others.

Duration: 60 minutes

Responsible: Stomatology specialists and residents, Nutritionist, Pediatrician, GCP.

#### Activity 4

Informative sessions on healthy eating

Objective: To promote a nutrient-rich diet that favors the development of the baby's teeth from pregnancy.

Content: Nutrients containing calcium, phosphorus, and vitamin D during pregnancy. Reduction of sugar consumption. Adequate hydration and oral health.

Methodology: Videos on nutrition during pregnancy and for the baby and their oral development, some useful tips for adequate nutrition.

Materials: Brochures, use of videos, among others.

Duration: 60 minutes

Responsible: Stomatology specialists and residents, Nurses, GCP, Nutritionist, Pediatrician.

#### Activity 5

Practical Workshops: «Oral health for moms and babies»

Objective: To teach oral hygiene techniques for mother and oral care for baby after birth.

Content: Hormonal changes and their impact on oral health (e.g., pregnancy gingivitis). Relationship between periodontal disease and premature birth or low birth weight. Oral care for the newborn from birth.

Methodology: Practical oral hygiene workshop for pregnant women. Teaching correct brushing and flossing techniques during pregnancy. Use of soft brushes and fluoridated toothpaste. Control of gum bleeding. Daily oral care routine.

Materials: Folders, use of videos, among others, display of brushes and dolls for demonstrations.

Duration: 60 minutes

Responsible: Stomatology specialists and residents, Nurses, GCP.

### Activity 6

Community awareness campaigns

Objective: To organize events in communities and health centers to disseminate the importance of oral health from birth.

Content: Maternal oral health to the baby, nutrition during pregnancy for healthy teeth, maternal oral hygiene, techniques and frequency, preparation for newborn oral care.

Methodology: Participatory talks with visual support, distribution of printed material with learned content, conducting conferences and workshops.

Materials: Educational newsletters, audiovisual materials, among others.

Duration: 60 minutes

Responsible: Stomatology specialists and residents, Nurses, GCP.

*Main results achieved with the promotion activities*

Through the implemented activities, a multidisciplinary perspective is achieved, involving the specialists who accompany future mothers throughout the pregnancy process and impacting, from their specialty, the awareness of the importance of breastfeeding for the newborn's adequate growth and its influence on health and oral development. Socialization in community spaces fosters family participation with the active involvement of pregnant women. The proposed activities enable the effective use and dissemination of health promotion actions in the stomatological area, based on the didactic-methodological needs on these topics from a multidisciplinary approach, acquiring new working methods to enhance promotion and prevention work in oral health.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Considering the addressed topic, the need for multidisciplinary work among the health professionals caring for pregnant women is recognized, both in their preparation to correctly address the newborn's oral health and in promoting educational activities that lead to a higher level of knowledge and sensitivity for more responsible action regarding the newborn's health. Furthermore, it is essential to continue deepening the training of professional performance in the promotion and prevention of oral health from pre-professional practice and work-based education as a way to achieve professional performance in different learning contexts, from the early years of the program, in developing actions that contribute to applying acquired knowledge for the benefit of the population they serve to strengthen their education in oral health, not only in pregnant but in the general population.

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