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Mastitis

Causes and Management

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Mastitis:

Causes and Management

1. Introduction

Mastitis is an inflammatory condition of the breast, which may or may not be accompanied by infection. It is usually associated with lactation, so it is also called *lactational mastitis* (67) or *puerperal mastitis* (1). It can occasionally be fatal if inadequately treated. Breast abscess, a localised collection of pus within the breast, is a severe complication of mastitis. These conditions form a considerable burden of disease and involve substantial costs (43; 112). Recent research suggests that mastitis may increase the risk of transmission of HIV through breastfeeding (76; 150).

Awareness is growing that inefficient removal of milk resulting from poor breastfeeding technique is an important underlying cause, but mastitis remains synonymous with breast infection in the minds of many health professionals (11; 15; 93; 94). They are often unable to help a woman with the condition to continue to breastfeed, and they may advise her unnecessarily to stop (43).

This review aims to bring together available information on lactational mastitis and related conditions and their causes, to guide practical management, including the maintenance of breastfeeding.

2. Epidemiology

2.1 Incidence

Mastitis and breast abscess occur in all populations, whether or not breastfeeding is the norm. The reported incidence varies from a few to 33% of lactating women, but is usually under 10% (Table 1). Most studies have major methodological limitations, and there are no large prospective cohort studies. The higher rates are from selected populations.

The incidence of breast abscess also varies widely, and most estimates are from retrospective studies of patients with mastitis (Table 2). However, according to some reports, especially from developing countries, an abscess may also occur without apparent preceding mastitis.

2.2 Time of occurrence

Mastitis is commonest in the second and third week postpartum (29; 120; 122), with most reports indicating that 74% to 95% of cases occur in the first 12 weeks (49; 122; 140; 167; 170). However, it may occur at any stage of lactation, including in the second year (7; 140). Breast abscess also is commonest in the first 6 weeks post partum, but may occur later (18; 32; 43; 49; 71; 74; 109; 119; 157).

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