

## 'Modern' practices endangering babies

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Mothers have adopted new 'modern' practices that are dangerous

Researchers last week warned that while mothers may have stopped dangerous practices like smearing cow dung, dust or ash on the umbilical cords of newborn babies, they are adopting 'modern' but dangerous ones.

A study by Makerere University School of Public Health found that women, particularly in urban areas, now apply antiseptics and powder on their babies' cords. In addition, more mothers are introducing feeding bottle before their babies are even one month old. Still, others use other milk alongside breast milk, or abandon breastfeeding altogether. In 35% of the cases sampled in the study, cow milk, plain water, sugar, tea or gripe water were given to babies in the neonatal period.

These methods are not recommended by the World Health Organisation and contribute to Uganda's high neonatal mortality rate, which stands at 27 per 1,000 live births. The neonatal mortality rate has reduced by less than one percent over the last five years. The neonatal period refers to the interval from birth to 28 days of age. It represents the time of the greatest risk to the infant.

Approximately 65 percent of all deaths that occur in the first year of life happen during this four-week period. Neonatal mortality rate is the number of deaths during the first 28 completed days of life per 1,000 live births in a given year or period.

The Uganda New Born Study (NEWEST) researchers warn that Uganda's high neonatal mortality rate may stand in the way of the country's efforts towards achieving the fourth and fifth millennium development goals: reducing child mortality rates and improving maternal health, respectively. The study found that only a fraction of mothers practise proper care for their babies in the first month.

It also found that proper care interventions for babies, while culturally acceptable, are not well known. Proper neonatal care begins with regular visits to the antenatal clinic during pregnancy and giving birth in a proper health facility, assisted by qualified medical personnel.

According to Evelyn Taaka, a midwife at Nsambya hospital, exclusive breastfeeding for at least one month, keeping the umbilical cord clean without applying anything to it, waiting at least six hours before bathing the baby for the first time and watching out for danger signs such as yellowing of the skin and difficulty in breathing, are key to proper neonatal care.

During pregnancy, women and their partners are advised to work closely with health workers to ensure that more children live to see their first birthday and subsequently become adults.

The challenge for Uganda, however, according to the study’s findings, is ensuring that policies and local interventions already in place are equitably distributed and used for improved coverage and quality of maternal and child health interventions, especially in rural areas.

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