

Factors Associated with Stunting at Birth and at 6 Weeks in the Northern Cape Province, South Africa

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Abstract : Introduction: The first 1000 days from conception to 24 months, is a critical period for healthy growth and development. In South Africa, stunting is a major public health issue with significant health consequences. We determined associations between demographic, health and anthropometric indicators of mothers and their infants. Methods: A cross-sectional study was conducted in all districts in the Northern Cape. All mothers with 5-7 week old babies visiting PHC facilities could participate. A questionnaire was completed in a structured interview with each mother. Weight and length of the baby at birth and at 6 weeks were used to determine stunting, while weight and height of the mother were measured for body mass index (BMI). Results: Eight hundred questionnaires were completed in 92 facilities. The median age of mothers was 26 years (range 10-46 years), and 44,9% were married. Almost 40% relied on a government grant as main source of income. Two-thirds (64,9%) had not planned the pregnancy, and 19,4% had a Caesarian section. Although 79% breastfed exclusively, more than a quarter (26,1%) smoked cigarettes or used snuff during pregnancy, while 9,4% drank alcohol. At birth, 17,7% of boys and 13,0% of girls were stunted (height-for-age below -2SD from the WHO reference values), while at 6 weeks this had increased to 30,8% of boys and 14,1% of girls. In terms of mothers, 25,4% were classified as obese and 24,6% as overweight at 6 weeks. Compared to babies that were not stunted, significantly more babies of mothers that were older, overweight, used ART, relied on a grant and smoked/snuffed during pregnancy were stunted. Conclusion: To address stunting, interventions aimed at encouraging healthy lifestyles with the emphasis on maintaining a healthy weight, healthy eating and smoking cessation before pregnancy are urgently required.

Keywords : growth, health, South Africa, stunting

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