

Systematic Review of Breastfeeding Outcomes Among Mothers with Autism

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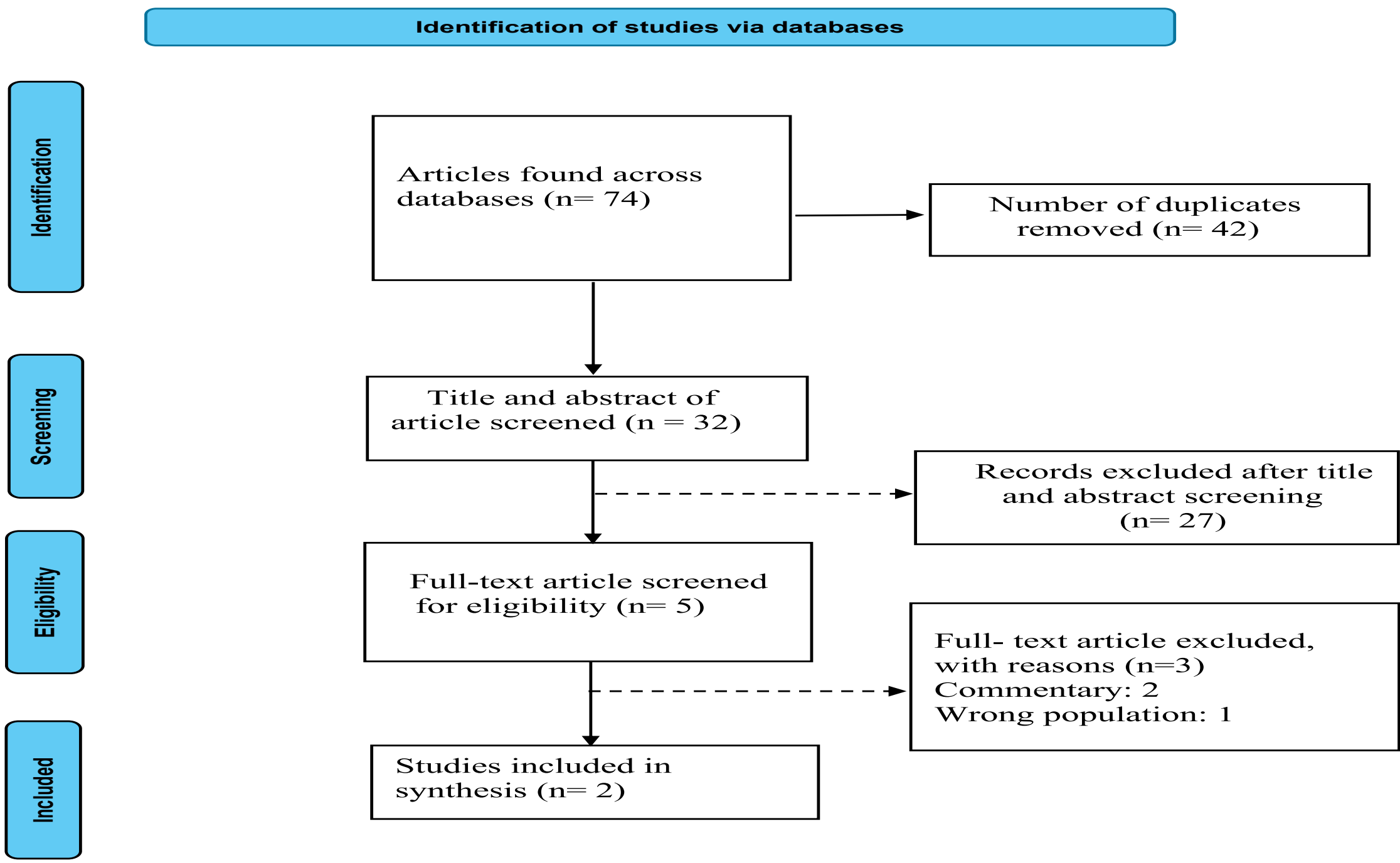
Introduction

- Women with diagnosed autism represent a growing but historically overlooked population in maternal-child health research.
- Although autism is increasingly recognized in adult females, little is known about how autistic traits influence pregnancy, postpartum adjustment, and early infant-feeding experiences.
- Breastfeeding is widely promoted for its health benefits, yet it can present unique challenges for autistic mothers.
- Existing studies suggest that autistic mothers may experience distinct barriers to breastfeeding, but the evidence base remains sparse.
- To address this gap, we conducted a systematic review of the literature examining breastfeeding experiences among autistic women.
- This review sought to answer the following question: What barriers to breastfeeding have been described in the literature for women diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder?

Methods

- A structured literature search was conducted using PubMed to identify research on infant feeding experiences among autistic women and autistic mothers. A targeted search string was developed to maximize relevance and exclude genomic and molecular studies. Studies were published within the last 10 –15 years
- Key Search Terms: autistic women OR autistic mothers, and Infant feeding OR breastfeeding OR chest feeding OR Lactation OR milk expression OR formula feeding. The final search returned 33 articles.
- Titles and abstracts were screened. Five articles met the eligibility criteria for full-text screening. Only two studies were included in the final synthesis (quantitative: 1; qualitative: 1). One examined neurodivergent mothers, and the other two were commentary articles; all were excluded (see Prisma flow chart)
- Two reviewers independently extracted data from all included studies, and interobserver agreement (IOA) was calculated, reaching 90% agreement. Extracted findings were synthesized to identify common themes and gaps in the literature regarding infant feeding among autistic women.

Study quality was assessed using the **Newcastle–Ottawa Scale** to evaluate methodological rigor and risk of bias.



Quantitative Results

- Approximately 64% of mothers with autism experienced breastfeeding difficulties with their first child, compared to 51% with their second child.
- Additionally, 37% reported they had low milk supply for their first child, and 31% for their second child.

Qualitative Results

Three themes were identified: (1) Intense Sensory Perception (Overstimulated, Over-touched, Overwhelmed), (2) Focused Determination, and (3) One Size doesn't Fit All.

(1) Intense Sensory Perception

- Mothers with autism reported feeling overstimulated while breastfeeding their infants. Infant sounds, sucking sensations, skin-to-skin contact, and milk let-down were sensory triggers.

“Crying babies are a sensory nightmare. My whole-body shivers and cringes and my skin crawls.”

“Sensory issues like noises, crowds, and sensations bother me. I needed a quiet, dark room with no distractions or bright lights to stay calm.”

- Touch was the most triggering of all five sensations. Participants also felt overwhelmed by stress, anxiety, and frustration.

(2) Focused Determination

- Mothers with autism reported being “hyper-focused” or “obsessed” on learning how to breastfeed their infants.
- Some mothers with autism were determined to breastfeed despite the challenges they encountered and the pressure from people to give up.

“I don’t like being touched in general, and babies invade that.”

“It’s usually when he is crying. I feel overwhelmed, like I can’t take it anymore.”

(3) One Size doesn't Fit All.

- Mothers with autism reported that healthcare professionals often do not acknowledge their unique breastfeeding experiences.

“Don’t view us as broken and less, but different. It’s a neurological difference-don’t judge us if we seem less attached emotionally.”

“Eye contact is a socially constructed thing. Basically, don’t assume we are all terrible mothers. It is demeaning.”

Conclusion

This literature review suggests that mothers with autism experience distinct and multifaceted barriers to breastfeeding, particularly related to sensory sensitivities, emotional overwhelm, and a mismatch between their needs and traditional healthcare approaches. Despite these challenges, many mothers demonstrate strong determination and commitment to breastfeeding, highlighting the importance of individualized and supportive care. These findings suggest that current breastfeeding education and support may not fully address the unique experiences of mothers with autism.

Future research should continue to expand the evidence and inform the development of tailored, sensory-informed, and patient-centered interventions to better support autistic mothers in infant feeding.

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