

## Early resumption of sexual intercourse and its determinants among postpartum Iban mothers

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**Received:** 18 February 2013

**Accepted:** 22 March 2013

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### ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** Recurrent pregnancy with close child spacing can result from early resumption of sexual intercourse during the postpartum period. This would expose mothers to complications such as unsafe abortion, postpartum depression and premature birth. The aim of this study is to identify the factors associated with early resumption of sexual intercourse among postpartum Iban mothers.

**Methods:** This is a cross sectional study conducted in Sri Aman Division, Sarawak between 1<sup>st</sup> July and 31<sup>st</sup> August 2006. A total of 265 Iban mothers agreed to participate in this study. They were interviewed face-to-face using structured questionnaire. Any postpartum sexual intercourse at 6 weeks or less is considered an early resumption of sexual intercourse.

**Results:** Univariable analyses showed significant association between early sexual intercourse and use of contraceptive; mothers' and husbands' income; mothers who believed their husbands were sexually abstinent during their confinement period; mothers who stayed with their spouse after delivery; and those with high libido. Multivariable analysis showed only mothers' and husbands' income, use of contraceptive and those who believed their husbands practiced sexual abstinence during their confinement period were significantly associated with early resumption of sexual intercourse.

**Conclusions:** Counselling on postpartum resumption of sexual intercourse among Iban mothers should focus on these determinants to ensure a more effective counselling outcome among Iban mothers.

**Keywords:** Early resumption, Sexual intercourse, Postpartum mothers, Determinants, Family planning

### INTRODUCTION

Women health has been an important agenda in the development of the nation. Improvement in women's health is one of the indicators for national health status. Many programmes have been developed nationally to ensure improvement in women's health is achieved which in turn will influence the formation of productive communities and health of the nation.

An important element that has been identified in women's healthcare is sexual practice during the postpartum period. WHO has outlined the guidelines in women healthcare during postpartum period and stated the importance of counselling related to resumption of sexual intercourse. Among other issues are postpartum physiological changes, risk of early repeat pregnancy and ovulation process, and last but not least decision making in family planning during this period.<sup>1</sup>

However in Asian communities, counselling services related to sexual practice has not been widely discussed. One of the reasons is the prevalent belief in the community that sexual issues are not publicly open for debate, thus hindering needed services and information from reaching the targeted group.<sup>2,3</sup> Similar situations are also observed with varying degrees in Europe, the United States, Africa and Australia.<sup>4</sup>

Many factors which are biological, psychological and sociological can affect women's decision on their sexual practice after delivery. Such factors involve beliefs of traditional healthcare and religious which result in delay or non-delay of repeated pregnancy.<sup>6</sup> Factors that affect early resumption of sexual intercourse are known vary according to places and communities.<sup>4,6</sup>

Recurrent pregnancy with close child spacing will affects family, socio economics, medical and psychosocial well-being.<sup>7,8</sup> Other negative impacts reported are unsafe abortion and its complications, postpartum depression and premature delivery.<sup>8,9</sup>

The aims of this study are to assess the prevalence and determine the factors associated with early resumption of sexual intercourse among postpartum Iban mothers.

## METHODS

This was a cross sectional study involving 265 Iban postpartum mothers from 13 governments antenatal clinics in Sri Aman Division, in the state of Sarawak, Malaysia. Although Sri Aman Division has 16 antenatal clinics, these 13 clinics were chosen because they provide child immunisation service. Postpartum mothers were recruited when they brought their children for immunisation to these clinics. Data collection for this study was done between 1<sup>st</sup> July and 31<sup>st</sup> August 2006. The sample size was calculated using Epi Info software by CDC Atlanta. All respondents had face to face interviews conducted by 3 trained interviewers. The interviews were carried out in Malay language and respondents answered structured questionnaire which consists of 3 sections. The questionnaire contains questions on sociodemographic background, health care, belief and practice during postpartum period and record on delivery. The questionnaire was pre tested and validated at four government's antenatal clinics in Sri Aman Division. All respondents gave written consent. This study was approved by Research and Ethics Committee Medical Faculty Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia and Medical and Research Ethics Committee. A total of 288 postpartum Iban mothers were approached and 265 mothers agreed to participate giving a 92% response rate. The 23 mothers who did not participate had moved out from Sri Aman at the time of the study.

In this study, early resumption of sexual intercourse is defined as any vaginal intercourse which occurred within 6 weeks or earlier after delivery. Libido was measured using 2 of the 19-item Female Sexual Function Index (FSFI).<sup>10</sup>

## Statistical analysis

Univariable analyses were carried out by using Pearson Chi Square to find the association between early resumption of sexual intercourse and type of delivery, mothers' and husbands' socio-demographic factors, reproductive profile, breast feeding, use of contraception, libido and some measures of postpartum living arrangement and care. The determinants were analysed by performing multivariable analysis using multiple logistic regression. The results are considered significant when  $p < 0.05$  or 95% CI did not include 1. All statistical analyses were carried out using SPSS version 11.5.

## RESULTS

### *Prevalence of Early Sexual Intercourse during Postpartum Period*

A total of 265 Iban mothers were interviewed and 192 (72.5%) had resumed sexual practice at the time of the study. Of these 192 respondents, 99 (51.6%) mothers had resumed sexual intercourse within the first 6 weeks after delivery. Among all respondents, the prevalence of early resumption of sexual intercourse after delivery was 37.4% (99/265). The earliest sexual intercourse was reported in week 2, and almost all women had resumed sexual intercourse by week 24 postpartum. Mean period for sexual intercourse resumption among these mothers was at  $7.2 \pm 3.6$  week.

### *Factors that Influenced Early Resumption of Sexual Intercourse among Postpartum Iban Mothers*

The results significantly showed mothers who earned more than RM 1000 had early sexual intercourse during their postpartum period compared to those who earned less than RM 1000,  $p < 0.05$ . On the other hand, significantly more mothers with husbands' income less than RM 1000 had early postpartum sexual intercourse,  $p=0.040$  (Table 1). This study also found mothers who used contraceptive method had early sexual intercourse compared to those who did not use any contraceptive method (45.3% vs 31.1%,  $p < 0.05$ ) (Table 2).

Table 2 also shows factors such as staying together with spouse after delivery ( $p = 0.004$ ), believing husbands were sexually abstinent throughout their postpartum confinement ( $p = 0.009$ ), and higher interest for sex ( $p = 0.012$ ) were significantly associated with early resumption of sexual intercourse among these postpartum Iban mothers.

In the multivariable analysis, mothers' and husbands' income, use of contraceptive and mothers who believed that their husbands were sexually abstinent during their postpartum confinement are found to be significant determinants for early resumption of intercourse among postpartum Iban mothers (Table 3).

**Table 1: Association between postpartum mother's and husband's sociodemographic characteristics and early resumption of sexual intercourse among postpartum Iban mothers.**

Characteristics	n	Early sexual intercourse				p value
		Yes		No		
		f	%	f	%	
<b>I. Postpartum Mothers</b>						
Age (Years)						0.778
≤ 19	26	10	38.5	16	61.5	
20-34	182	70	38.5	112	61.5	
≥35	57	19	33.3	38	66.7	
Number of Children						0.777
1	67	27	40.3	40	59.7	
2-4	162	60	37.0	102	63.0	
5 or more	36	12	33.3	24	66.7	
Religion						0.961
Christian	246	92	37.4	154	62.6	
Others	19	7	36.8	12	63.2	
Mother's Educational Level						0.147
Primary school	106	34	32.1	72	67.9	
Secondary school or higher	159	65	40.9	94	59.1	
Mother's occupation						0.979
Not working	201	75	37.3	126	62.7	
Working	64	24	37.5	40	62.5	
Mother's income (RM)						<0.05
Less than 1000	246	83	33.7	163	66.3	
1000 or more	19	16	84.2	3	15.8	
<b>II. Husband</b>						
Husband's Ethnicity						0.248
Iban	229	99	43.2	130	56.8	
Others	36	0	0.00	36	100.0	
Husband's Work Status						0.418
Working	260	98	37.7	162	62.3	
Not working	5	1	20.0	4	80.0	
Husband's Average Income/Month						0.004
Less than RM1000	208	87	41.8	121	58.2	
RM1000 or more	57	12	21.1	45	78.9	
Husband's workplace						0.249
In same district	230	89	38.7	141	61.3	
Out of district	35	10	28.6	25	71.4	
Husband returns home daily						0.838
Yes	226	85	37.6	141	62.4	
No	39	14	35.9	25	64.1	
Type of house						0.064
Long house	152	64	42.1	88	57.9	
Others	113	35	31.0	78	69.0	
Type of family						0.815
Extended	155	57	36.8	98	63.2	
Nuclear	110	42	38.2	68	61.8	
Presence of elders (Mothers/Mothers-in-law/ others)						0.317
Yes	211	82	38.9	129	61.1	
No	54	17	31.5	37	68.5	
Maid/ Domestic Help						0.242
Not available	242	93	38.4	149	61.6	
Available	23	6	26.1	17	73.9	

\*Significant when  $p < 0.05$

**Table 2: Association between type of delivery, breast feeding practice, and reproductive and sexual-related factors, and resumption of early sexual intercourse among postpartum Iban mothers.**

Characteristics	n	Early sexual intercourse				p value
		Yes		No		
		f	%	f	%	
Type of Delivery						0.188
Normal without sutures	99	42	42.4	57	57.6	
Others	166	57	34.3	109	63.9	
Breastfed baby during 6 weeks postpartum period						0.200
Yes	197	78	39.6	119	60.4	
No	68	21	30.9	47	69.1	
Resumption of menstrual bleed						0.217
Yes	189	75	39.7	114	60.3	
No	76	24	31.6	52	68.9	
Started family planning within 6 weeks postpartum period						0.018
Yes	117	53	45.3	64	54.7	
No	148	46	31.1	102	68.9	
Decision on family planning use made by						0.188
Husband/spouse	36	17	47.2	19	52.8	
Others	229	82	35.8	147	64.2	
Decision on number of children wanted made by						0.250
Husband/spouse	42	19	45.2	23	54.8	
Others	223	80	35.9	143	64.1	
Stayed with spouse after delivery						0.040
Yes	232	92	39.7	140	60.3	
No	33	7	21.2	26	78.8	
Believed husband was sexually abstinent throughout the 6 week postpartum period						0.009
Yes	227	92	40.5	135	59.5	
No	38	7	18.4	31	81.6	
Reported frequent desire for sexual intercourse						0.012
Yes	156	68	43.6	88	56.4	
No	109	31	28.4	78	71.6	
Reported high desire for sexual intercourse						0.008
Yes	192	81	42.2	111	57.8	
No	73	18	24.7	55	75.3	

\*Significant when  $p < 0.05$ **Table 3: Multivariable analysis for early resumption of sexual intercourse among postpartum Iban mothers.**

Variables	Early sexual intercourse				Adjusted OR	95% C.I.	
	Yes		No			Lower	Upper
	f	%	f	%			
Mother's income (RM)							
1000 or more	16	84.2	3	15.8	25.2	5.1,	124.7
[Less than 1000]	83	33.7	163	66.3			
Husband's income (RM)							
Less than 1000	87	41.8	121	58.2	2.9	1.3,	6.9
[1000 or more]	12	21.1	45	78.9			
Started family planning within 6							

weeks postpartum period							
Yes	53	46.9	60	53.1	2.0	1.1,	3.6
[No]	46	30.3	106	69.7			
Believed husband was sexually abstinence during the 6 week postpartum period							
Yes	92	40.5	135	59.5	2.9	1.1,	7.8
[No]	7	18.4	31	81.6			

[ ] Referent; Multivariable analysis adjusted for mothers' and husbands' socio-demographic characteristics, living arrangement during postpartum confinement, presence of elderly relatives, availability of domestic help, and sexually-related factors including reported frequency and degree of sexual desire (libido).

## DISCUSSION

Prevalence of early resumption of sexual intercourse, within the first six week after delivery, among all Iban mothers in this study was 37.4%. This rate is similar to those reported by Thai<sup>11</sup> and Nigerian<sup>12</sup> mothers but lower than that experienced by Canadian women<sup>13</sup>. These differences in prevalence are due to differences in personal, as well as socio-cultural background, beliefs and practice of postpartum care in these mothers.

The variation in timing of sexual intercourse resumption from as early as week 2 and as late as 20 to 24 weeks postpartum, with a mean of week  $7.2 \pm 3.6$  week is consistent with the study done in Thailand.<sup>14</sup> The differences in length of time to sexual intercourse may be due to differences in adherence to traditional practices by the attending older female relatives, such as mothers or mothers-in-law, when providing or supervising postpartum care to these mothers.

This study showed mothers with higher average income were significantly more likely to resume sexual intercourse earlier compared to mothers who earned less. Similar result was found in a study in the Philippines where mothers' economic status influenced life style and birth spacing. Mothers with autonomy in decision making for their family are normally higher educated and earning their own income.<sup>15</sup>

In contrast, more postpartum Iban mothers whose husbands earned less than RM1000 had earlier sexual intercourse compared to those with husbands who earned more. Husbands with lower income may work closer to home or may be under employed giving them more free time to care and be with their wives who had just given birth. This finding is similar to the findings from two African studies by Cleland et al and Lawoyin et al which found husbands who earned less resumed sexual intercourse earlier compared to those who had higher income.<sup>16,17</sup>

This study found over 85% of the mothers believed their husbands were sexually abstinent during their postpartum confinement. More of these mothers allowed earlier

resumption of sexual intercourse compared to those who did not trust their husbands. A study by Awusabo-Asare and Anarfi in Ghana also showed that mothers who reported having husbands who avoided sexual intercourse after delivery will resume earlier sexual intercourse in order to protect their relationship.<sup>18</sup> These mothers were less adherent, or chose to stop following traditional practices which prohibit sexual intercourse during the postpartum period. Of concern to us, about a third of Iban postpartum mothers who had not started contraceptive use reported early resumption of sexual intercourse.

## CONCLUSION

The prevalence of early resumption of sexual intercourse among all postpartum Iban mothers in the study is 37.4%, with mean sexual resumption at  $7.2 \pm 3.6$  weeks. Among those who had resumed postpartum sexual intercourse, more than half had done so at 6 weeks or earlier. Many Iban mothers had resumed sexual intercourse with no contraceptive cover. The determinants of early sexual intercourse are mothers' and husbands' income, contraceptive use and mothers who believed their husbands practiced sexual abstinence while they were in confinement. Counselling on postpartum resumption of sexual intercourse should consider these determinants to ensure a more effective outcome among Iban mothers.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study was funded by Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia Research Fund, Project No. FF-163-2006. We would like to thank the Director-General of Health Malaysia, Deputy Director-General of Health Malaysia (Research and Technical Support), and the Director of the Institute for Medical Research (IMR) for permission to publish this paper.

*Funding: UKMMC Fundamental Grant*

*Competing interests: None declared*

*Ethical approval: Approved by Research and Ethics Committee Medical Faculty Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia and Medical and Research Ethics Committee*

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DOI: 10.5455/2320-1770.ijrcog20130603

**Cite this article as:** Radziah M, Shamsuddin K, Jamsiah M, Normi M, Zahari THM, Syimah ATN, Asiah MN. Early resumption of sexual intercourse and its determinants among postpartum Iban mothers. *Int J Reprod Contracept Obstet Gynecol* 2013;2:124-9.