Aims

There are no national nor local recommendations guiding oral intake during active labour that balance the needs of women and aspiration risk with potential intervention. This survey aimed to identify preferences of women for eating and drinking in labour and advice they received regarding oral intake during labour.

Methods

Women in active labour at the Royal Brisbane and Women’s Hospital participated in a survey. Primary study outcomes were their experience of eating and drinking in labour. Responses were recorded on 5-point Likert scales. From medical records, their demographics and their risk factors for anaesthetic intervention at delivery were collated. Free text comments were summarised using conventional content analysis.

Results

Surveys were distributed between March and November 2019; 149 women completed the survey (response rate 47%). Their mean age was 31 (SD 4.4) years, with a median gestation of 39 (IQR 38-40) weeks.

More women agreed that they felt like drinking in labour compared to eating food (Figure 1 and 2).

One hundred and five women (73%) agreed information from health professionals on what to eat or drink in labour would be useful. Sixty (40%) women received oral intake in labour advice from midwives alone, 20 (13%) from multiple sources and 41 (28%) received no advice. Figure 3 shows direct quotations from participants to the questions: “If you were given advice about what to eat or drink in labour what advice were you given?”. Themes were what to drink, what to eat, timing of intake and maintaining comfort.

Ninety eight (66%) and 32 (21%) had at least one known maternal or fetal factor respectively for increased risk of complications during surgical or anaesthetic intervention at delivery.

Conclusion

Pregnant women received advice from various sources prior to labour. Most women felt like drinking but not eating during labour. Guidelines on oral intake in labour may be beneficial to women, balancing adequate caloric intake within minimisation of aspiration risk if intervention is required.

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Figure 1: Responses to "I felt like eating in labour"

Figure 2: Responses to "I felt like drinking in labour"

Figure 3: "If you were given advice about what to eat or drink in labour what advice were you given?"

- "Water, energy drinks, light snacks"
- "Told not to eat anything in labour"
- "Stop eating after epidural"