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Prenatal mental and physical health, behaviours, and maternity care experiences during the COVID-19

Karen Matvienko-Sikar

K Matvienko-Sikar¹, J Pope¹, E Olander², S Leitao¹, S Meaney¹

¹University College Cork, Cork, Ireland

²City University London, London, UK

Contact: karen.msikar@ucc.ie

Background:

During pregnancy, women's mental and physical health, health behaviours, and experiences of maternity care can have significant implications for obstetric, maternal and child outcomes. These factors can be impacted by adverse life-events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Aim:

This study examined pregnant women's mental and physical health, health behaviours, and experiences of maternity care during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methods:

An international online survey was conducted in June and July 2020. Pregnant women self-reported levels of general stress, pregnancy-specific stress and COVID-19 related stress. Women also self-reported their mental and physical health, general health behaviours and COVID-19 related health behaviours. Maternity care experiences were reported using closed and open-ended questions. Descriptive statistics and thematic analyses were used for quantitative and qualitative data respectively.

Results:

573 pregnant women from 15 countries participated. Women reported high levels of pregnancy-specific and COVID-19-related stress, and low levels of mental and physical health, during the pandemic. Women reported distress related to restrictions implemented in their maternity care that limited in-person interactions with healthcare professionals and partner attendance at antenatal appointments. Lack of information on COVID-19 and pregnancy also led to uncertainty for women about pregnancy and birth. Encouragingly, pregnant women reported high levels of adherence to public health advice and healthy prenatal behaviours.

Conclusions:

The COVID-19 pandemic is having significant adverse effects on the mental and physical health of pregnant women. Population level interventions targeting pregnancy- and pandemic-specific stress are needed to better support the mental and physical health of women during the on-going pandemic and minimise adverse outcomes for women and children.

Key messages:

- The COVID-19 pandemic is significantly adversely impact the mental and physical health of pregnant women, indicating need for population level interventions for prenatal mental and physical health.

- Restrictions in maternity care and uncertainty about COVID-19 impacts are key determinant of adverse prenatal physical and mental health outcomes.