

How a lack of information about COVID-19 impacted pregnant Australians

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Pregnant women wanted more timely information during the early years of the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia, new research has found.

Health services were quickly trying to reorientate care and services to deal with the pandemic, but communication about the impact of COVID-19 on the maternity sector needed to be more proactive as pregnancies don't stop during a pandemic.

"We found that women wanted timely and targeted information about the impact of COVID-19 on their pregnancy and babies," said Ms. Cassandra Caddy, lead author on the paper published in the journal *PLOS ONE* last week.

"A lack of information left some people feeling stressed, anxious and frustrated, and could contribute to more negative experiences during pregnancy and birth."

Using data from the TIGER C19 project—which tracks [public opinion](#) about COVID-19 in Australia on Reddit and Twitter—and interviews with 21 women across Australia who were pregnant during the period March 2020 to July 2021, the researchers found without timely information from formal sources like [health services](#), [pregnant women](#) turned instead to informal sources like social media.

Study participants described how pregnancy and parenting groups on [social media](#) platforms gave them a broader space in which to ask questions about COVID-19 and their pregnancy, and see that they weren't alone.

But it also risked exposing them to misinformation, particularly myths around the safety and potential side effects of COVID-19 vaccines.

This reiterates the importance of health services being available to provide timely, clear, consistent and accurate advice, said Dr. Alyce Wilson, Burnet Honorary Senior Research Fellow and senior author on the paper.

"During a [public health crisis](#), health services need to be proactive in providing targeted and accessible information," Dr. Wilson said.

The study found that holding statements can be helpful in situations when things are changing very quickly, rather than a delayed message or not saying anything at all.

"For example, when we were going into another lockdown, a health service saying, 'we are going to let you know ASAP about how this will impact antenatal care,'" Dr. Wilson said.

"Or, 'we are concerned about these things too, and we're trying to find out the latest information for you' instead of waiting to say anything until a plan was in place."

The researchers acknowledged that health services were under immense pressure in very unpredictable times, but felt there was a lot that could be learnt from the pandemic to improve communication strategies in future emergency situations.

As well as information about the risks posed by COVID-19 for pregnant women and their babies, women described the need for practical information too, like where to find the maternity ward, through to where their partner could park the car when they were in labor.

Opportunities to gather this practical information were limited by a decrease in face-to-face visits.

"There was sort of that disconnect of like, 'I'm still having a baby in the hospital and I actually have no idea where the labor ward is,'" Ms. Caddy said.

A lot of participants also wanted more opportunities for interactive and

real-time discussions, rather than just watching pre-recorded videos in lieu of in-person antenatal classes.

For example, participants described how it may be helpful to have one of the hospital's midwives online for an hour a day so that people could jump on and ask them questions.

Or a hospital staff member taking parents-to-be on a virtual tour of the hospital so they could be prepared mentally for where they were going to give birth.

"We found that information is powerful in terms of making women feel more in control, less anxious, and more empowered," Ms. Caddy said.

"This research provides practical suggestions from pregnant women themselves, about how we can best provide this information during public health crises like pandemics."

More information: Cassandra Caddy et al, "Tell us what's going on": Exploring the information needs of pregnant and post-partum women in Australia during the pandemic with 'Tweets', 'Threads', and women's views, *PLOS ONE* (2023). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0279990](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0279990)

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