

9 in 10 women in England found to enter pregnancy with at least one indicator that risks baby's health

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9 in 10 women enter pregnancy with at least one indicator that risks baby's health. Credit: University of Southampton

Nine in ten women in England enter pregnancy with at least one

indicator that may increase health risks to them and their baby, according to new research.

Common indicators were women not quitting [smoking](#), failing to take [folic acid](#) before [pregnancy](#) and having a previous pregnancy loss.

Researchers from the NIHR Southampton Biomedical Research Centre, hosted by University Hospital Southampton and University of Southampton, analyzed data from over 650,000 mothers.

They created a first national picture of women's [health](#) before pregnancy. The team says the findings show an urgent need for nationwide policies to help women improve health before pregnancy.

Large-scale analysis

Women who are healthy and well when they enter pregnancy are less likely to develop complications. Their children also tend to have better long-term developmental and health outcomes.

This study used data on 652,880 [pregnant women](#) in England. It was routinely collected by midwives at appointments between April 2018 and March 2019. Information ranged from women's employment status and [social support](#) to pregnancy complication history, health behaviors and [medical conditions](#).

The researchers considered a range of behaviors and conditions that put mother and baby at risk. These included smoking, not taking recommended folic acid supplements, obesity and previous pregnancy loss.

The results, published in *BJOG: An International Journal of Obstetrics & Gynaecology*, found some common behaviors and conditions.

Among the 23% of women who smoked, 85% did not quit smoking before pregnancy. Almost three-quarters did not take a recommended folic acid supplement.

Dr. Danielle Schoenaker, lead author and Research Fellow at University of Southampton, said, "Our analysis shows that there is an urgent need for the government, NHS and public health agencies to develop and put in place population-level policies and programs that support all women to be as healthy as possible before and between pregnancies.

"Such policies may start from educating children about the importance of being healthy before starting a family, to improving food environment and affordability and implementing effective mandatory flour fortification with folic acid. Routine conversations and support for pregnancy preparation could also be offered by primary healthcare services."

Health inequalities

How common indicators were varied widely based on women's age, ethnicity and the level of deprivation in the area where they lived.

For example, younger women were less likely to have a physical health condition when entering pregnancy, but more likely to have a mental health condition compared with older women.

Women from a Black ethnic background were more likely to be living with obesity, but less likely to smoke around the time of getting pregnant compared with [white women](#). Generally, more health risk indicators were observed in women living in the most deprived areas.

Prof Nisreen Alwan, Professor of Public Health at University of Southampton, said, "Health inequalities before pregnancy must be

narrowed with population-level policies across multiple sectors to address the wider determinants of health. This is to benefit all parents-to-be in society and allow them to prioritize their health and well-being, particularly those affected by social and economic hardship."

National picture of women's health

Southampton researchers will continue their work with OHID to publish a yearly picture of women's health before pregnancy. This will help evaluate if current policies are effective, and advocate for new policies, to optimize health before pregnancy and reducing inequalities.

Minister for Women's Health Maria Caulfield said, "All babies deserve the best start in life, which is why we're working to improve preconception care and information for women. The NHS website is an excellent place to access up-to-date free help and advice, including support to stop smoking.

"We're consulting on the amount of folic acid added to white flour—a step that could help [women](#) carry healthy fetuses and avoid neural tube defects. And we'll also be reconvening the Maternal Disparities Taskforce in April to continue to drive progress in improving access to preconception and maternity care for all mothers and babies."

More information: Danielle A. J. M. Schoenaker et al, Women's preconception health in England: a report card based on cross-sectional analysis of national maternity services data 2018/19, *BJOG: An International Journal of Obstetrics & Gynaecology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1111/1471-0528.17436](https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-0528.17436)

Provided by University of Southampton

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